United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.* If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Bloomfield Avenue Meeting House
Other names/site number: The First Unitarian Congregational Society of Hartford
Name of related multiple property listing**:** N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing

2. Location

Street & number: 50 Bloomfield Avenue
City or town: Hartford State: CT County: Hartford
Not For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___national ___statewide ___local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B _X_C ___D

Signature of certifying official/Title: **Date**

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official: **Date**

Title : **State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register

___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register

___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

_____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:	X
Public – Local	
Public – State	
Public – Federal	

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)	X
District	
Site	
Structure	
Object	

Bloomfield Avenue Meeting House | Hartford, Connecticut
Name of Property | County and State

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RELIGION/Religious facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RELIGION/Religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)
Modern Movement/Neo-Expressionist

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)
Principal exterior materials of the property: Concrete, wood, steel cables, glass, aluminum

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with **a summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Unitarian Society of Hartford Meeting House, located at 50 Bloomfield Avenue in Hartford, Connecticut, is a Mid-Century Modern/Neo-Expressionist building designed by American architect Victor A. Lundy, A.I.A. (1923–) in 1962 and completed in 1964.[1] The building occupies a six-acre site near the intersection of Bloomfield and Albany Avenues at the northwest edge of the City of Hartford and is situated in an open meadow with long-range views. The two-story Meeting House has a symbolic round form comprised of twelve reinforced concrete radial walls of varying heights that support an innovative roof assembly of overlapping wood decking panels bearing on suspended steel cables.[2] Both the basement and main level of the structure are organized around large central gathering spaces with secondary rooms located at the periphery, between the radial walls. The Society, which still occupies the building, has made moderate alterations over time to address deficiencies in accessibility and functionality; however, the building is in excellent condition and retains a high degree of architectural integrity.

[1] The congregation has had various names throughout its history; for the purposes of this nomination, the congregation will be called by its current name, the Unitarian Society of Hartford.
[2] See Kelly. The round form symbolizes a Unitarian belief that “there are many approaches to the Truth that unites them.”

Narrative Description

Setting

The six-acre site is L-shaped and gently slopes from Bloomfield Avenue east towards the Meeting House (Figure 1 and Photograph 1). The primary portion of the site, measuring 710 feet by 286 feet, affronts Bloomfield Avenue at its western edge and includes the Meeting House, two entry drives, and a small parking lot set in a large open meadow. A smaller rectangular extension to the north, measuring 512 feet by 114 feet, contains the main parking lot (Figure 2).

Landscape

Mature deciduous trees on the north and east edges of the property visually screen the building from adjacent parcels and open meadows to the west and south provide largely unobstructed views for pedestrians and vehicles traveling along Bloomfield and Albany Avenues. While Lundy provided plans for vehicular circulation, parking, pedestrian circulation, and necessary site work such as grading, he proposed minimal landscape features outside of the retention of existing trees and the removal of dead ones.[3]

The landscape reflects a 1991 master plan for the site by Russel, Gibson, von Dohlen Architects, that sought to soften the edges of the lawn surrounding the building with the addition of sugar maple, birch, dogwood, spruce, and profusion crab trees to the north, east, and west lawns, and small low-lying planting beds around the three building entrances. The most significant change was the construction of the "Memorial Garden" surrounding the southeast entrance of the building.[4]

In 1999, an anonymous gift allowed the congregation to further develop the design concept, with some modifications, including the installation of a patio area with benches to allow visitors a comfortable place to meditate and remember their loved ones. A Tree of Life sculpture, created by John Stowe, and a Memorial Garden plaque were installed on the exterior of a concrete radial wall flanking the entrance (Photograph 02). Plantings were selected to bloom through most of the season. Over time, some of these plantings matured and were replaced. In later years, a Pet Memorial Garden, consisting of a small, paved patio with benches, was constructed near the accessible parking area.[5]

A children's playground adjacent to the northeast entrance to the building and three solar arrays holding 132 solar panels in the southwest corner of the property between the chapel and the Memorial Garden were added between 2009-2022 (Photograph 03).[6] A brick masonry and painted metal site fence was added to the adjacent property, the Village for Families & Children, formerly the Children's Village of the Hartford Orphan Asylum, in 2023 (Photograph 04).

Neighborhood

The Meeting House is in a neighborhood comprised of residential properties and several large institutions, including the University of Hartford and the Watkinson School to the north and the Village for Families

[3] Lundy to Reiser, December 2, 1963. The original 1963 site plan includes only minimal landscape alterations such as tree clearance and grading to prepare the site for the construction of the new Meeting House.
[4] See Russell Gibson von Dohlen Architects.
[5] Janice Newton and David Newton, "A History of Our Meeting House Memorial Gardens."
[6] David Newton, Chair, Building and Grounds Sub Council, in discussion with the author, June 2023.

& Children to the south.[7] The Watkinson School and the Village for Families & Children are individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The surrounding residential community is comprised of two National Register historic districts—the 500-acre Hartford Golf Club Historic District to the west and the 120-acre West End North Historic District to the south. The Hartford Golf Club Historic District encompasses the Hartford Golf Club and contains 143 contributing buildings organized in a loose grid of rectangular blocks and cul-de-sacs. Most of these are gracious single-family homes constructed between 1915 and 1936 and designed in a mix of Tudor Revival or Colonial Revival styles. The West End North Historic District contains 291 contributing resources, mostly two-and-a-half-story single-family homes constructed between 1870 and 1930 and designed in a range of architectural styles that were prevalent during that period, including Stick Style, Queen Anne, Shingle Style, and Colonial Revival.

Exterior[8]

The Bloomfield Avenue Meeting House has a highly sculptural, structurally expressive, and easily identifiable form, like many of architect Victor Lundy's ecclesiastical works. Nestled into the low point of the gently sloping site, the tent-like building appears to rise out of the ground like an anomalous geological formation when approached from the west (Photograph 05). In plan, its weblike composition creates a polygonal form with no clear hierarchy or point of entry. While describing the project, Lundy wrote:

> It gives one the feeling of being able to see it from all directions and to see out from it in all directions. The concept is that many points of view draw together and become united in the center. One may start in one of many directions to reach the unity of the center; a unity of equality...From the outside, there is a sense of being able to enter from any direction, which is so.[9]

The twelve structural concrete walls extend radially towards the central sanctuary space. The walls, which are low at the periphery and rise to varying heights as they extend inward, support an innovative roof assembly of overlapping planes of tongue-and-groove cedar decking that bear on concentric rings of steel cables suspended between the radial walls (Figure 03). The central sanctuary roof, which is supported by a secondary system of exterior cables, is lower than the surrounding roofs, forming an inverted clerestory that provides natural light to the ambulatory and peripheral spaces (Figure 04). Due to this unconventional roof arrangement, Lundy concealed roof drains in the concrete walls to allow water to drain to the periphery of the building (Photograph 06).[10] While a 1964 photograph shows that the roof assembly was originally finished with a dark nylon roof membrane (Figure 05), the roof is now covered by a light-colored polyurethane roof membrane installed in 2018 to address persistent leaks.[11]

The concrete structural walls divide the exterior into twelve bays of varying widths with inset walls protected by deep overhangs. On the main level, the primary entrance is located on the west side of the building and is comprised of an aluminum storefront assembly with two single-leaf doors separated by large plate-glass windows (Photograph 07). Above the window assembly is a clear Plexiglas transom that bridges the space between the top of the aluminum frame and the underside of the tongue-and-groove wood roof deck. Secondary entrances, set in narrow bays at the northeast and southeast corners of the

[7] In mid-2023, the Village for Families & Children erected a red brick and iron fence along its property bordering the Meeting House, partially impacting the open view to the building from the south.
[8] Unless otherwise stated, the drawings and specifications are the source of the original design as referenced herein.
[9] Lundy, "New Ideas of Victor Lundy," 119.
[10] Lundy, "Architectural Drawings."
[11] Newton, "Meeting House Roof—A Continuing Saga."

building, have centrally located double-leaf aluminum doors flanked by sidelites set beneath large Plexiglas transom windows (Photograph 08). The exterior walls are primarily composed of glass-and-aluminum door assemblies separated by wood wall panels that match the roof deck in material and texture (Photograph 09).

Due to the sloping site, the three easternmost bays of the building are two stories high, allowing direct access to the basement level from the sunken exterior courtyard spaces. The main level has exterior balconies that are accessible from the chapel and additional meeting rooms at the periphery of the building (Photograph 10). The glass-and-metal single-leaf doors leading from the chapel to the flanking balconies are notable because of their trapezoidal shape, which mimics the sloping ends of the concrete walls (Photograph 11). The east elevation of the chapel is fully glazed with both fixed plate-glass and sliding doors that look out on a picturesque opening between mature deciduous trees to the meadow beyond.

Interior

The approximately 27,000 square-foot building has a web-like polygonal plan; each floor is centered around a large gathering space with peripheral secondary rooms tucked between the twelve radial concrete walls.[12] The main level contains the key public areas of the building, including the sanctuary, chapel, vestry and robing room, meeting rooms, lounge, office spaces, and an ambulatory, which is a hallway that encircles the centrally located sanctuary (Figure 06). The façade is punctuated by many entrances that welcome visitors into the building and symbolize the inclusiveness of the congregants inside. The basement is organized around an informal community space known as the Fellowship Hall, which is surrounded by classrooms, mechanical rooms, janitorial rooms, and a kitchen at the periphery (Figure 07).

The primary entrance on the west side of the building leads into a large lobby area. The lobby is on axis with the sanctuary, chancel, and chapel and is defined by unfinished concrete walls to the north and south, and by the underside of the tongue-and-groove wood deck that forms the roof. The underside of the wood deck forms a catenary curved plane that draws the eye eastward to the clerestory and the sanctuary beyond. The lobby is flanked by two open stairwells with wood and steel railings that lead to the basement. The concrete lobby floor is covered with russet-colored, wall-to-wall carpeting that is typical throughout the main level (Photograph 12).

While the lobby looks out on the meadow and receives natural light through the clerestory, the central sanctuary space is comparatively dark and enclosed due to its lack of windows and lower ceiling height. The perimeter of the sanctuary is defined by a partial-height partition finished with mahogany veneer paneling that separates the large worship space from the surrounding ambulatory. The partition features glass sliding doors at its west end that can be opened or closed along a track in the floor. Thirteen rows of simple rectilinear wood pews are arranged on either side of a central aisle (Photograph 13). While original in design, four of the pews were later shortened to provide open areas for accessible wheelchair seating.[13]

The most striking feature of the 350-seat sanctuary is the ceiling, a graceful canopy of radial wood strips that follow the natural curvature of the suspended roof (Photograph 14). At the perimeter, where the ceiling height increases to form a clerestory, the wood strips of varying lengths are suspended from stainless steel cables, forming sunbeam-like “rays” that filter soft natural light to the ambulatory below

[12] Patriot Properties, Inc., “Field Card for 50 Bloomfield Avenue.”
[13] David Newton, Chair, Building and Grounds Sub Council, in discussion with the author, June 2023.

(Photograph 15). The original drawings called for 36 recessed light fixtures mounted above the ceiling and set within openings in the sanctuary canopy; these fixtures were never installed.[14] The current lighting scheme, installed in 2022, consists of ten cylindrical pendant fixtures suspended from the wood ceiling strips (Photograph 16). These pendants replaced an earlier single fixture mounted at the center of the sanctuary ceiling below the apex of the roof.[15]

The chancel, located on the east side of the sanctuary, is a raised pentagonal platform defined by a low slatted-wood screen and accessed by central stairs (Photograph 17). An Austin Organ Company organ, which is original to the building, is set at the rear of the chancel, concealed behind a second slatted screen, and flanked by the organ pipes. At the front of the chancel, the organ console and the speaker's lectern are situated on the north and south sides of the stairs, respectively.

The chapel, named "The Payson Miller Chapel" in honor of the minister who advocated for the design of the Meeting House but passed before construction commenced, is situated behind the chancel and is the most significant space in the collection of peripheral rooms located outside the sanctuary (Photograph 18). The chapel is defined by the concrete radial walls to the north and south, a floor-to-ceiling window with sliding glass doors to the east, and a glass and Plexiglas interior wall to the west, added in the 1980s to allow the space to be acoustically isolated from the ambulatory and sanctuary.[16] Trapezoidal metal-and-glass doors on the north and south elevations provide direct access to exterior balconies. Like the entrance lobby, the ceiling is formed by the exposed underside of the wood decking panels supported by exposed steel cables (Photograph 19). The chapel pews, while also made of wood, are more expressive in design than the rectilinear sanctuary pews and incorporate curved legs that allude to the curved form of the roof and the angle of the concrete radial walls. The flooring is wall-to-wall carpeting. (Photograph 20).

The remaining secondary peripheral spaces include meeting rooms, offices, the vestry and robing rooms, and a lounge (Photograph 21). Though functionally distinct, these spaces are similar in material and detail to the chapel. Within the wider bays, however, large aluminum-and-glass sliding partitions allow for the space to be subdivided into two to three smaller rooms for more intimate gatherings (Photograph 22). Two small toilet rooms, finished with mahogany veneer paneling, are located off the ambulatory on the north and south sides of the building (Photograph 23). Lundy's original lighting scheme for the peripheral spaces included recessed light fixtures and additional fixtures concealed within wood valences at the exterior and interior walls. These were never installed; to address the lack of electrical lighting, suspended linear fluorescent fixtures were added at a later date in some of the larger rooms (Photograph 24).[17] Additional alterations were made to the main level in 1993 to improve building accessibility. This included the insertion of an elevator in one of the peripheral meeting rooms and the enlargement of one of the small toilet rooms on the north side of the building (Photograph 25).[18]

While plans for the basement were included in Victor Lundy's original 1962 architectural drawings, its construction was not completed until 1967-68 due to budget overruns during the contractor bidding

[14] The lights were intended to be contained within waterproof housings mounted on the roof of the sanctuary.
[15] David Newton, Chair, Building and Grounds Sub Council, in discussion with the author, June 2023. The single pendant light, visible in limited archival photographs, was installed as the congregation's first attempt to address the low lighting conditions in the sanctuary.
[16] See Luopa.
[17] David Newton, Chair, Building and Grounds Sub Council, in discussion with the author, June 2023.
[18] Cook and Puryear, "Accessibility Alterations."

process.[19] Access to the basement is provided by a set of wood-and-metal open-riser stairs in the main lobby (Photograph 26) or via the elevator added in 1993. The basement level can also be directly accessed from the building exterior through entrances located on the northeast and southeast corners of the plan or via doors that lead directly to peripheral rooms on the east elevation. The centrally located Fellowship Hall is a large, polygonal, utilitarian space with an exposed concrete waffle slab ceiling supported by a ring of six rectangular steel columns (Photograph 27). Its peripheral walls, which are separated into twelve bays, are punctuated by painted wood doors leading to the secondary rooms and transom windows and sidelites that provide natural light to the interior space. While Lundy's original drawings indicate that the walls of Fellowship Hall would be finished with the same mahogany veneer paneling used on the main level, they were constructed with plain acoustical paneling instead (Photograph 28). Lighting in Fellowship Hall is limited to fixtures concealed within wood valences mounted to the peripheral walls and ceiling-mounted lights recessed within the coffers of the waffle slab.

The secondary peripheral rooms of the basement serve supportive functions and are utilitarian in design. The equipment room, mechanical room, pump room, storage rooms, and foyers have concrete walls, floors, and ceilings and are illuminated with simple ceiling-mounted light fixtures. The kitchen and the restrooms have similar finishes but with vinyl-tile floors. The two meeting rooms on the east side of the basement have large transoms, sliding windows, and glass doors that provide natural light to the interior spaces and direct access to small exterior courtyards located beneath the main-floor balconies (Photograph 29).

Statement of Integrity

The Meeting House retains historical integrity in terms of its location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. The congregation has maintained the building in continual use and good repair. However, the unconventional and experimental roof design required multiple interventions during construction and in the years after completion to address ongoing water infiltration issues.

Location and Setting

The Meeting House is in its original location reflecting the 1962 site plan and maintaining its organization within the landscape; surrounded by large open meadows to the east, west, and south and a parking lot to the north. Minor additions, including the Memorial Gardens, playground, and solar array, do not detract from the original concept of an expansive site with the Meeting House as its welcoming focal point. Aside from the addition of accessible parking, the extant vehicular circulation and parking lot system largely follows the design shown in Lundy's drawings. Modifications include minor changes to the configuration of the parking space striping and the addition of asphalt paving to the driveway and parking areas, which were specified as gravel in the original site plan. The setting, within a residential neighborhood consisting primarily of single-family homes and several sizeable institutions, remains largely unaltered.

Design, Materials, and Workmanship

The Meeting House retains its highly sculptural Neo-Expressionist massing; deceptively simple Modernist palette of concrete, wood, aluminum, and glass; and graceful interior finishes, exhibiting integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. Alterations to the building were principally made to address deficiencies in accessibility and functionality. The original dark neoprene roof was covered with a

[19] Lundy to Reiser, August 23, 1962. This letter documents the effort to reduce the initial construction cost by eliminating scope related to the interior fit-out of the basement space.

light-colored polyurethane roof membrane to address persistent leaks. While the current roof membrane is a departure in color from the dark membrane of the original design, it is pivotal to the long-term preservation of the building, given the inherent challenges of the original roof design. Interior alternations include the installation of contemporary lighting fixtures in the sanctuary and an accessible elevator at the periphery of the building. Evaluated in the aggregate, these changes do not detract from the overall integrity or legibility of the original design. The Meeting House's overall composition continues to convey Lundy's experimental approach to form, structure, materials, space, and light. The building remains indicative of the mid-twentieth-century structural expressionism that is the enduring legacy of his work through the 1960s.[20]

Feeling and Association

The building continues its original function as a Unitarian Meeting House and is occupied by the same congregation who commissioned it. Through their dedicated and responsible stewardship, the congregation maintains the rich symbolism intended by Lundy: many paths to one truth, inclusivity, and a sense of welcome.

[20] Kacmar and Tehrani, 93.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- [ ] A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- [ ] B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- [X] C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- [ ] D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark “x” in all the boxes that apply.)

- [X] A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- [ ] B. Removed from its original location
- [ ] C. A birthplace or grave
- [ ] D. A cemetery
- [ ] E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- [ ] F. A commemorative property
- [ ] G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)
Architecture

Period of Significance
1962-1968

Significant Dates
1968: building completed

Significant Person
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Architect/Builder
Lundy, Victor A., A.I.A.
Matthew J. Reiser, Inc. (builder)
Cook, Roy (architect, basement, 1967-1968)
Fred S. Dubin Associates (engineers)
Severund, Elstad, Krueger Associates (engineers)

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Unitarian Society of Hartford's Bloomfield Avenue Meeting House meets National Register of Historic Places Criterion C in the category of Architecture for the experimental and symbolic qualities of its unique Mid-Century Modern Neo-Expressionist design. The Meeting House, which is situated at the center of a gently sloping site, was conceived by the modernist architect Victor Lundy (1923–) and consulting engineers Severund, Elstad, Krueger Associates, and Fred S. Dubin Associates, who pioneered the innovative use of suspension cables for the sanctuary roof.[21] The Meeting House's expressed web-like plan, with irregularly spaced and varying-height radial walls forming multiple "spires," symbolizes the Unitarian belief that many paths lead to a universal truth, and the idea of transparency in faith is emphasized in the glazing encircling the façade, allowing those inside to look out in all directions. The Meeting House possesses state-level significance for its association with the Modernist reaction in Connecticut, also found nationally, against a strict International Style in favor of more expressionist forms for religious buildings. Lundy executed two such Neo-Expressionist churches in Connecticut: the Bloomfield Avenue Meeting House and the First Unitarian Church of Westport. The Meeting House meets the requirements established for the listing of religious properties in the National Register under Criteria Consideration A because it derives its primary significance from its architectural importance and not from its religious historic associations. The period of significance is limited to the construction of the building from 1962 to 1968, which encompasses the initial phase of construction and completion of the basement level by 1968.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Criterion C: Architecture

Post-WWII Modernist Church Construction in the United States

The selection of a modern architect and a site away from the downtown core for the new Hartford Meeting House was characteristic of a broader movement in postwar America, when churches, recovering from the economic restrictions of WWII, were flourishing with growing congregations. These congregants were increasingly coming from the developing suburbs, which were experiencing rapid growth due to the desire for affordable single-family homes for young families, the availability of government-subsidized home mortgages through the GI Bill, and the widespread adoption of the automobile.[22] Faced with inadequate urban facilities that could no longer accommodate the increasing number of families and children among its congregants, churches sought practical, economical solutions that would reflect contemporary ideas of religion and society.

In her book, *The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America,* author Gretchen Buggeln states that "by the 1950s, most congregations were building one of two styles: what contemporaries referred to as "Colonial" (a traditional, American look with red brick, white pillars, and a

[21] Dixon, 7.
[22] Buggeln, xiii.

steeple) and "contemporary" (churches in new forms, or new materials, without extensive ornament)."[23] Advice and opinions about how new church buildings should look and function proliferated in architectural journals and publications of the time; and national conferences were held where architects, church leaders, congregants, and product manufacturers could meet in person to discuss how modern architecture could align with current church missions.

In 1958, the American Institute of Architects produced an educational film, entitled *A Place to Worship*, that encouraged congregations to consider a contemporary approach to church design. In the thirteen-minute production, the narrator states:

> We live in a period of accelerated change, in the whirl of a technological revolution with its untold human consequences…for people who work in modern offices and factories, who live in modern communities, and drive streamlined cars, mere imitation of the architecture of past periods is out of place.[24]

The selection of the location and architect for new churches was largely the responsibility of church committees that were typically composed of various professionals with some knowledge of business, finance, and occasionally design and construction. One of the common characteristics of suburban congregations was a growth in young members, "no doubt one reason why so many congregations freely chose contemporary architecture."[25] Those building committees that were willing to embrace the more experimental forms of modern architecture were also tasked with convincing more conservative congregants to accept a more modern aesthetic. As Bugglen explains, "many church records, especially in the immediate postwar years, reveal tension surrounding design choice…Modernism was a departure from the familiar, and dissent regarding aesthetic choice was a common part of the building process."[26] The Hartford Unitarian Society was no exception, as the building committee faced a prolonged period of criticism from some congregants over the selection of the young modernist architect, Victor Lundy, and his unconventional proposal for their new Meeting House.[27]

Neo-Expressionism and Ecclesiastical Properties

International Style houses of worship, with their simple clean lines, were sometimes perceived as failing to convey adequate spiritual meaning and religious symbolism. As a result, other architects explored structurally expressive ecclesiastical buildings that pushed back against the reductionist tendencies of earlier Bauhaus principles. These buildings sought to elicit direct emotional and spiritual responses with more sculptural forms resulting in soaring interior spaces yet rendered in humble and natural materials.[28]

Examples of this architectural development are found across the U.S., notably Eero Saarinen's Kramer Chapel at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, IN (completed in 1958), Walter Netsch, Jr.'s (SOM) Air Force Academy Chapel in Colorado Springs, CO (completed in 1962), and Minoru Yamasaki's North Shore Congregation in Glencoe, IL (completed 1964). Unlike the International Style, which rejected historical references, these structures openly embraced allusions to established

[23] Buggeln, xv.
[24] Buggeln, 2–3.
[25] Buggeln, 58.
[26] Buggeln, 60.
[27] Criticism by some members of the congregation for Lundy's unconventional design approach is documented in a letter from Walter R. Greene, Jr., an architect from Avon, Connecticut, to the chair of the fundraising drive. A similar debate occurred during the design of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in New Canaan, Connecticut, completed in 1961 by architects Sherwood, Mills and Smith.
[28] Howe, 329.

ecclesiastical forms: a dramatic A-frame church and tower assembly (Saarinen) rendered in concrete that exaggerates the traditional church-and-steeple architype, a folded roof plane (Netsch) that creates a series of steeple forms, and a series of pointed arches (Yamasaki) that evokes Gothic cathedrals.

Neo-Expressionist Churches in Connecticut[29]

The national trend in some Modernist circles to embrace more expressionist forms is also seen at the state level in Connecticut. A highly notable example of this is the National Historic Landmark First Presbyterian (Fish) Church, in Stamford, designed by Wallace K. Harrison and completed in 1958 (Figure 08). The building's unusual massing, resembling the Christian symbol of a fish in three dimensions, is formed of thin-shell concrete clad in dark grey slate around large expanses of exposed precast concrete panels holding multi-colored dalle de verre. The composition reflects an extraordinary integration of modern liturgical, technological, and aesthetic considerations with Harrison's analysis and abstraction of French Gothic building tradition.[30]

Architect Joseph Salerno of Westport designed the visually arresting United Church of Rowayton, completed in 1962 (Figure 09). Salerno "recognized a warm, friendly, family-like relationship in the congregation and was dissuaded from the concept of a traditional house of worship."[31] Instead, he created a circular sanctuary with a bold spiral roof evocative of a giant wind-blown sail, a familiar and comforting form for this shorefront community—or of the Christian symbolism of the flame of the Holy Spirit for the Methodist Congregation.[32] Salerno, a graduate of Yale, used laminated wood to form the roof's complex geometry, visible from the sanctuary. Salerno was recognized by the American Institute of Architects with its First Honor Award for this design in 1963.[33]

Designed at nearly the same time as the Meeting House and conveying the expressive possibilities of steel-reinforced concrete and laminated timber arches, the sanctuary at Beth El Temple in West Hartford (1963) by architect Joseph Kane, is a high-ceilinged, twelve-sided polygonal space approximately 100 feet in diameter with twelve radiating concrete vaults "symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel."[34] The exterior envelope of the sanctuary is a series of arched bays. Each has a curtain wall infill. An upper glazed clerestory of colored glass has an abstract pattern of rectangular panes in predominantly blue tones. Below are brick panels rising to the spring line of the arches, with slit windows adjacent to the structural piers, emphasizing the nonstructural character of the curtain wall.[35] (Figure 10) Art historian Jeffery Howe noted that the building evokes the ancient desert tents used by the Israelites.[36]

Victor Lundy (1923-)[37]

Victor A. Lundy is among a small cohort of Modernist American architects who were educated in the transitional period between the pre-war Beaux-Arts traditions and post-war pedagogies of the Bauhaus movement. Unlike his Modernist contemporaries, however, Lundy did not altogether reject the influence of the Beaux-Arts in favor of Bauhaus principles, which favored simple, functional, and rational designs

[29] Some scholars refer to this style as "New Formalist." See Howe, 325.

[30] See Hayes.

[31] See Wright.

[32] "Rowayton Church: Ultra in Modern."

[33] Bowker, 794.

[34] Howe, 329.

[35] Hitchcock.

[36] Howe, 329.

[37] Victor Lundy's 101st birthday was on February 1, 2024.

over symbolism and historical references. While Lundy embraced new technology, material exploration, and innovative engineering techniques, his design process was also guided by explorations in conceptual drawing and symbology, resulting in structurally expressive residential, commercial, civic, and religious buildings that welcome open interpretation.[38] As Lundy explained in a February 1962 interview with *Architectural Record:*

> My buildings tend to have a strong, easily recognized image, because I try to make architecture say something boldly, simply, clearly…the great artists are primitives and what they say touches the fundamental ideas common to many men.[39]

Although his significant contributions to modern architecture were celebrated throughout a professional career that spanned nearly six decades, he has largely been overlooked by architectural historians until recently. The 2014 release of the documentary, *Victor Lundy: Sculptor of Space*, by the General Services Administration (GSA) and the 2019 publication *Victor Lundy: Artist Architect,* edited by Donna Kacmar, provide the first large-scale scholarly explorations of his work.

Background and Education

Lundy's talent for art and his understanding of light and form were evident at an early age. Born to Russian immigrant parents in New York City on February 1, 1923, his skill for drawing and painting was recognized as early as elementary school, when his art teacher remarked "this kid is something," after seeing a beautifully rendered orange circle he drew during a class exercise in first grade.[40] Although his parents and teachers assumed he would become an artist, Lundy attended New York University's (NYU) School of Architecture and Applied Arts to study architecture under the leadership of Professor George Gromort, who taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris before joining NYU.[41] At the time, NYU's architectural curriculum was modeled off the Beaux-Arts program that encouraged students to recognize composition, hierarchy, and order through the combined studies of calculus, drawing, and architectural history. After only two years at NYU, Lundy's education was cut short when he enlisted to fight in World War II in 1943.[42]

After leaving NYU, Lundy accepted a position in the Army Specialized Training Program at the University of Maine that was developed to train officers to lead the postwar reconstruction in Europe.[43] There, he studied advanced civil engineering until the army abruptly ended the program in 1944 and transferred all its participants to Europe to serve as infantry casualty replacements to provide adequate combatant forces.[44] After completing basic training on August 27, 1944, Lundy was shipped to France to serve on the frontline of General George Patton's Third Army. Lundy continued to draw throughout his service and recorded his experiences in sketchbooks small enough to carry in the pocket of his army uniform. He remembered, "Sometimes with a full field pack, I would make sketches as I walked…and I had a wonderful record. There were 27 sketchbooks and only eight survived."[45] These surviving "visual diaries" are preserved within the Prints & Photographs Division in the Library of Congress.[46]

[38] Lundy, "New Ideas of Victor A. Lundy," 105. Lundy's embrace of symbolism is consistent throughout his career, which continued through the rise of post-modernism.
[39] Lundy, "New Ideas of Victor A. Lundy," 105.
[40] Kacmar, 17.
[41] Kacmar, 18.
[42] *Victor Lundy: Sculptor of Space.*
[43] "Resume of Victor A. Lundy, Architect, A.I.A."
[44] Kacmar, 18.
[45] *Victor Lundy: Sculptor of Space.*
[46] Lundy, "World War II Sketches."

On November 12, 1944, Lundy was seriously wounded during a German artillery attack in Alsace-Lorraine, France, and nearly lost his left arm. After an extended recovery at an American Hospital in Birmingham, England, and later, at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., he was awarded a Purple Heart and discharged.

Lundy's war experience in Europe changed the trajectory of his career through a chance meeting with a captured German officer who taught Victor about the work of the German architects Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus and then-current chairman of the Department of Architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who was formerly the director of the Bauhaus before moving to Chicago to teach at the Illinois Institute of Technology.[47] With his interest in architecture reignited, Lundy applied to Harvard immediately after he was released from active duty and was admitted into the program a week after the war ended. At Harvard, Lundy, and his fellow classmates, who included future architectural luminaries like Harry Seidler and Paul Rudolph, were introduced to the principles of European Modernism that rejected the historical tradition of the Beaux-Arts and reduced buildings to their essential form. Years later, when reflecting on this experience, Lundy noted: "I think Harvard almost ruined me…I want my buildings to be exuberant, not safe, lovely cubular things."[48] Upon earning a bachelor's degree in 1947 and a master's degree in 1948, Lundy was awarded the prestigious Rotch Traveling Scholarship that allowed him to tour Europe and record his experience through paintings and sketches.[49]

Soon after passing his architectural licensing exam on November 5, 1950, Lundy moved to Sarasota, Florida, where a group of his contemporaries, including Paul Rudolph and Ralph Twitchell, had settled and established practices. Their work, which adapted modernist aesthetics to suit the warm humid climate of Florida, collectively became known as the "Sarasota School of Architecture." Lundy lived and worked in Sarasota from 1951 to 1960 and completed several notable commissions, including the Sarasota County Chamber of Commerce (1956), a pagoda-like structure with a sculptural glazed tiled roof; Galloway's Furniture Showroom (1959), a circular, glass-walled structure with an organic curved roof made of laminated redwood arches; and his first ecclesiastical commission, the Presbyterian Congregation of Venice/Nokomis (1954), a wooden post-and-beam building that became known as the "drive-in church" because congregants would park their cars in front of the structure to listen to the sermon, delivered from a second-floor podium containing a pulpit, an organ, and the choir.[50] The "drive-in-church," published in *Life* magazine helped establish his reputation as a preeminent architect of religious structures. [51] It also led to nine more completed commissions in Sarasota, including the Fellowship Hall for the Venice/Nokomis Presbyterian congregation (1956), the Bee Ridge Church (1956), and St. Paul's Lutheran Fellowship Hall (1959).[52]

Critical Reception

Lundy had earned a reputation for his roof designs before the construction of the Meeting House in Hartford. In 1960, a *Time* magazine article noted that his designs seemed "to make a whole building out of a roof." In describing his buildings, Lundy noted that if some of them, "particularly churches, seem to

[47] *Victor Lundy: Sculptor of Space.*
[48] Jones, 173.
[49] Kacmar, 22.
[50] Kacmar, 53–85.
[51] "Drive-in Church: Floridians Worship in Cars."
[52] Kacmar, 99.

sweep upwards… because I'm an incurable optimist. My buildings don't look like dogs with their tails between their legs. They're brave."[53]

By 1961, Lundy was lauded in the architectural press, along with contemporary Paul Rudolph, as "new talent."[54] Cranston Jones, who covered architecture for *Time* magazine, summed up what he saw as the trajectory of Lundy's burgeoning career: "…in the 1920s, modern architects banned the [shapely] roof, replacing it with the flat roof garden. Rudolph has reacted against this by bringing back the pointed, playful silhouette. Lundy went even further and made the roof the whole essence of his buildings."[55] Cranston noted that Lundy's "highly successful churches" exploit the "Gothic expressiveness" of laminated wood.[56] Describing the Bee Ridge roof, Cranston called Lundy's "draped, flowing pattern of intersection structural curves…one of the loveliest forms evolved in wood of this century."[57]

In 1962, noted architectural writers Albert Christ-Janer and Mary Mix Foley described Lundy's Lutheran Church of St. Paul as "yet another form inspired by the laminated wooden arch," describing his embrace of the dramatic, symbolic roof:

> Here the curve is reversed, traveling inward and upward to a dramatic spire-like peak over the center line of the church. Steel piers, faced with coquina stone, support the arches at their outermost edge and act also to define broad covered porches formed by the roof extension…Of his unusual solution, the architect writes: "The roof shape of this church is not a derived shape out of the past; it is a symbolic shape. There is an attempt here in the form of the church to symbolize God and man—God in the central high areas reaching and pointing upward, man in the low horizontal side areas that hug the earth.[58]

Lundy's body of Sarasota work set the stage for his Connecticut projects, where he would further press the technical limits of dramatic sculptural roofs to make larger symbolic statements about worship and education.

Connecticut

In 1960, Lundy established an office in New York City.[59] In the summer of 1963, he moved his offices "from New York City and Sarasota to…Guilford, Conn. [sic], to "be in the center of all my work, and to have everything under one roof."[60] By 1963, Lundy had four active projects in Connecticut—First Unitarian Church and Hillside Elementary School in Westport, Westminster Unitarian Church in East Greenwich (not built), and the Unitarian Meeting House in Hartford. Guilford's proximity to New York also allowed Lundy to continue to work on projects in the larger tri-state area.[61]

The First Unitarian Church, Westport

[53] "Architect Lundy Feels Designs Show Optimism."
[54] Jones, 173.
[55] Jones, 176.
[56] Jones, 176.
[57] Jones, 177.
[58] Christ-Janer and Foley, 144-145.
[59] Kacmar, 226.
[60] Pass to Lundy, August 4, 1963. Project correspondence in the Society Archives indicates that Lundy was still receiving letters addressed to him in Guilford at least into the spring of 1965.
[61] Lundy's early-to-mid–1960s projects include Church of the Resurrection in East Harlem (completed 1965), the Singer Company Showroom in Manhattan (completed 1965), and the "Space Flowers" refreshment stand for the New York World's Fair (completed 1964). See Kacmar and Tehrani, "Project List," 228–229.

One of his first commissions in the northeast was the Unitarian Universalist Church in Westport, Connecticut, which included both a Parsonage and a main sanctuary space. After learning about the project while attending a conference at Yale University, Lundy requested a meeting with the minister at the time, the Rev. Arnold Westwood, to offer his services. Although the building committee had already advertised for an architect, conducted interviews, and selected a short list, Rev. Westwood was so captivated by Lundy that he insisted the committee consider him as well. After meeting Lundy and seeing his work, the building committee agreed to end its formal search and hire him immediately.[62]

As part of his proposal, Lundy submitted an *Explanation of the Building*, where he outlined the project goals:

> From the exterior, the effect will be mainly that of a simple fundamental shape…sheathed in copper, with ridges running vertically to suggest uplift. The richness and the surprises occur mainly inside. Like the old Quaker Meeting Houses, this building is simple, built of honest durable materials and of good workmanship. Unitarians see their home as a "place" not a house, cathedral, ship, or church. The combining of all the functions with their complications of purpose under one form that in part derives its shape from these requirements is in line with the traditional Unitarian meeting place.[63]

Designed between 1959 and 1961 and completed in 1965, the First Unitarian Church is a structurally expressive building comprised of two wings with low roofs that dramatically swoop up, forming a peak that soars 65 feet above the main sanctuary (Figure 11). Supported by curving laminated wood beams, the two sections of the roof appear to float weightlessly above the site as they rise, never quite meeting and forming a continuous skylight along the ridge of the building.[64] The primary level is enclosed with large sliding-glass panels, blurring the distinction between the sanctuary space and the grove of trees surrounding the site. In describing the building, Lundy said that "the real sanctuary is the nature left there on the land."[65]

The use of laminated wood timbers to form a dramatically sculptural roof is an approach that Lundy had experimented with in his Sarasota ecclesiastical buildings, such as Bee Ridge and St. Paul's Lutheran Fellowship Hall. The incorporation of dramatic natural lighting is a common element in most of Lundy's churches: "His built work exudes a sophisticated knowledge of light and material. Shadows and matter merge to form spaces that feel simultaneously archaic, and also rooted in contemporary culture."[66] Architect Christopher Domin notes that "during his eight-year tenure on the Gulf Coast, Lundy designed a multitude of building types, from single-family houses to office buildings and motels, but it is in the churches that he found a home for his deeply held reverence for structural logic and his judicious use of light, and where his search for a deeper origin of form and idea intertwined."[67]

The award-winning church is among his most highly admired works. For this commission, Lundy was awarded the *Progressive Architecture* Design Award (1960), the National Gold Medal, Exhibition of the Building Arts, from the Architectural League of New York (1960), the First Honor Award from the New York Chapter of the AIA (1964).[68]

[62] "The Building of The Unitarian Church in Westport, 1958-1961."
[63] Kacmar, 101–2.
[64] Dixon.
[65] Kacmar, 102. Lundy's light touch on the landscape at Westport hints at his largely hands-off approach at Hartford.
[66] Kacmar, 90.
[67] Kacmar, 93.
[68] Kacmar, 227.

The Hillspoint School, Westport

Lundy's largest commission in Connecticut was the Hillspoint School. In 1960, the school board sought a new school building "innovative and flexible in design, yet practical and economical to operate."[69] Lundy utilized many features that he later employed in the Hartford Meeting House, including his trademark sculptural roof and the incorporation of exposed tongue-and-groove wood decking, mahogany wall paneling, and large expanses of glazing offering open views to the surrounding landscape.[70] Architect Eugene Michael Hollander, who had three children attend the school said of Lundy's design: "Hillspoint was designed on the scale of the student. It's low, cantilevered overhang provides a welcome, sheltered entry into a child's world. The school is without an institutional ambiance. It is innovative and rich in spatial experiences."[71]

Perhaps the most striking similarity to the Meeting House is the building's plan, which incorporates a central gathering space surrounded by peripheral classrooms with flexible movable walls that open directly to the exterior (Figure 12). As at the Hartford Meeting House, the sheltering roof form becomes a unifying element that responds to the programmatic spaces inside, starting low at the entrances and secondary peripheral rooms and swelling in height over the central spaces.

The school was featured in the AIA's School Building Architectural Exhibit (1963) and the American Federation of the Arts Exhibit (1964).[72]

The Hartford Meeting House

Beginnings (1956–1960)

The Unitarian Society was a well-known institution with a history of over 100 years in Hartford when the congregation decided to relocate to its current residential neighborhood. The Society was originally located in the central business district of downtown Hartford, where it built three separate meeting houses to accommodate its changing congregation. The last downtown meeting house, located at 215 Pearl Street and completed in 1924, was a traditional brick and stone structure featuring a pedimented entrance set beneath a large Palladian window.[73]

By 1956, it became apparent that the Pearl Street Meeting House could no longer accommodate the rapidly growing congregation, especially the youth groups, and the Society convened a planning committee to evaluate its options. While it considered expanding the 1924 meeting house or purchasing a larger existing church in downtown Hartford, neither option addressed the lack of parking that was becoming a growing problem for congregants commuting from the outlying regions.[74] Considering this, the committee voted to build a new church in one of the surrounding suburbs. The congregation's reverend, Payson Miller, hailed the decision, stating to *The Hartford Courant* in 1960 that "with this much land for parking space, and increased and better facilities for our church and school program…we can expect to witness within a short time, a rapid growth and overall development."[75]

[69] See Hollander.
[70] "Tricorn for Teaching."
[71] Hollander.
[72] Kacmar, 227.
[73] Meyer, 47.
[74] Meyer, 58–59.
[75] See Davenport.

In June 1960, the Society paid Watkinson College Preparatory School $50,000 for six acres of land on Bloomfield Avenue for the construction of a new Meeting House with a 320-seat sanctuary and church school facilities for 300 children.[76] This sale, as well as the sale of four additional parcels to the University of Hartford, were part of a larger effort by the Watkinson School to improve its aging facilities and expand its programming.[77, 78]

In December 1960, the congregation selected Lundy's preliminary design for the new Meeting House from a group of invited architects, including Paul Rudolph and a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright.[79] The construction campaign was formally launched on March 14, 1961, with the selection of J.B.C. Thomas as the general chairman for fundraising. His appointment was announced by the president of the Society, Edward A. Richardson.[80]

The Rev. Payson Miller, who had led the Hartford Society since 1941, was instrumental in the design direction, telling Lundy that he envisioned "something that came up out of the ground" that "symbolized the [Hindu] belief that all religions are but so many paths to a single, all-pervading reality."[81] While the First Unitarian Church in Westport embraced a soaring elongated sanctuary that conveyed openness to the surrounding landscape, the Hartford building committee requested a closed and inward-focused design.[82] The plans for the new Hartford Meeting House were unveiled in June 1962 and were described by Lundy as:

> Twelve concrete walls radiating out from the central sanctuary and rising fin-like above the roof give a distinctive form to the polygonal building. The sanctuary, in the center, will receive daylight indirectly from a band of high windows just below the outer roof level. The wooden roof deck over the sanctuary…will be suspended by steel cables hung in a cobweb pattern from the radial walls.[83]

The plans were controversial, as many members of the congregation favored a more traditional design in keeping with the style of its Pearl Street Meeting House. Of central concern was the unconventional nature of the cable-supported roof, which some anticipated would be expensive and difficult to maintain. In December 1962, congregant Walter R. Greene, Jr., an architect from Avon, Connecticut, issued a letter to the Church Council on behalf of a "frustrated and well-calumned [sic] dissident group of the congregation," that outlined their specific objections. He explained:

> The Concept of this building I believe to be inherently expensive, and consequently somewhat incompatible with the original call of need…
>
> The Materials to be used as finishes, on the other hand, are inherently raw throughout, which fact will undoubtedly effect [sic] our yearly maintenance cost, and should be well recognized…
>
> The Details which I have examined leave me with no small concern…

[76] See Lauriat.
[77] "Watkinson Sells 6-Acre Tract to Unitarian Group."
[78] The land parcel had particular significance to the congregation as it once belonged to Anna Watkinson Wells, wife of James Wells, who was one of the Society's founders.
[79] "Unitarians Pick N.Y. Architect." The name of Frank Lloyd Wright's protégé is not provided in the article.
[80] "J.B.C. Thomas to Head Church Fund Drive."
[81] Meyer, 60.
[82] Kacmar, 112.
[83] Meyer, 60.

> The Maintenance will of necessity be very high. In No place are materials or details chosen for freedom of maintenance. There will almost certainly be rapid wear and tear, I am afraid, high replacement costs in many areas. (I forgot to mention that the steel cables holding up the roof depend only on paint as protection against rust, and failure).[84]

On October 28, 1962, amid the dissension over the design and anticipated cost of the structure, the Rev. Payson Miller died suddenly at his home.[85] Although many congregants remained adamantly opposed to the design, the project was seen as an important part of Rev. Miller's legacy that few were willing to disrupt.[86] A memorial service was held on November 4, where Miller's friend and colleague, Dr. Charles R. Joy, gave a eulogy that inextricably linked the former reverend with the new Meeting House:

> Payson Miller was no mason who cut stones for the church you are about to build here in Hartford… He worked in a medium more enduring than stone. He was an artist of the spirit, constructing a great temple of humanity where all free souls might join in creating fellowship in their quest for the one Supreme Being, of which he firmly believed we are all a part.[87]

Despite ongoing hesitancy and projected cost overruns, ground at the six-acre site was broken in March 1963 by Cleora Basinger Miller, the widow of the late Rev. Miller.[88]

Design (1960–1962)

Lundy began his design process by studying the beliefs of the congregation. He described his resultant scheme as a "symbolic and lyrical interpretation of the Unitarian Church."[89] The structure is composed of twelve radial, reinforced concrete walls that rise above the roofline, taking the place of traditional spires in a house of worship. The walls are of different heights and are irregularly spaced, symbolizing individuality and the Unitarian ideal of many paths leading toward the Truth.[90] The walls stand in dramatic tension, never converging yet working together to become a cantilevered structure from which a system of suspension cables supports the wood roof deck. The decision to design a round structure and forgo traditional symbols of church design was intended to "make no one thing more important than another." [91]

Lundy's design exemplifies his experimental approach to modernity, which differentiates him from many of his professional contemporaries. Unlike his Modernist contemporaries, who rejected historicism or references to the past, Lundy uses "the spatial and structural logic of Gothic, Baroque, or even early Christian architecture as a point of departure."[92] Like the churches and cathedrals Lundy sketched in Europe while serving in World War II, the expressive form of the Hartford Meeting House was "developed logically out of engineering proportions, dimensions, and purpose."[93]

Lundy's restrained yet unconventional use of modern materials—exposed concrete, tongue-and-groove wood, mahogany veneer, aluminum, steel, and large panels of glass—demonstrates his mastery of

[84] Greene to Thomas, December 12, 1962.
[85] "Rev. Payson Miller Dies; Unitarian Church Pastor."
[86] See Luopa.
[87] Meyer, 62.
[88] "Unitarian Meeting House Begins to Sweep Upward in Abstract."
[89] "Architectural Honors: Guilford Man Wins Top Award for Church."
[90] "Unitarians Break Ground Today."
[91] Lundy, "New Ideas of Victor A. Lundy," 120.
[92] Kacmar, 90.
[93] Kacmar, 112.

architectural tectonics and deep engagement with experimentation through the "collaboration with industry, material fabricators, and the leading engineers of his generation."[94] Lundy's use of expressive roof forms, his embrace of innovative structural solutions, his artistry in wood and exposed concrete, and his overall design scheme, recognized in national publications of the time, combine to express the ideals of Unitarianism throughout, with a plan and circulation that draw visitors from many angles together for worship in a central sanctuary. The dynamic ceiling of the sanctuary is the final focal point at the sacred center, where congregants gather under a gracefully curved canopy of honey-colored wood strips, reminiscent of the delicate tracery found in Gothic cathedrals, to create a unique spiritual atmosphere of oneness.

For the Hartford Meeting House, the architect designed a unique roofing system that is suspended on steel cables and responds to outside air movements, creating the effect of a "living" rather than a static building, calling to mind a billowing tent.[95] In heavy winds, one can hear the movement of the structure as the overlapping tongue-and-groove wood decking panels move on the suspension cables. The form was designed to ensure that the sanctuary ceiling was as high as possible for acoustic reasons. The unconventional structure resulted in unique challenges during construction as the contractor struggled to achieve the exact sag necessary to support the decking at the prescribed geometry.[96] On the exterior, the overlapping planes of the wood roof decking were covered with a neoprene membrane while the interior wood surface was left unfinished.

The sanctuary space is central to the design of the polygonal structure. The congregation specifically requested an enclosed sanctuary to express its unity and the concentration required by worship. Covering the sanctuary is a dramatic canopy of attenuated wood strips, which like the exterior roof, is reminiscent of a prayer tent.[97] The rays of golden-brown wood emanate from the center of the ceiling like beams of light radiating from the sun; they swoop up at the center apex, soaring out of sight, and stretch outward over the encircling ambulatory, terminating at irregular lengths.

The chancel, located on the east side of the sanctuary, is a raised pentagonal platform. The swell organ, which is considered a major component of the services, is by Austin Organs, Inc. of Hartford.[98] It is installed at the rear of the chancel, where it is concealed behind a slatted screen and flanked by the organ pipes.[99] The wood rays of the ceiling extend over the organ and are cut short of individual pipes that rise above the height of the slats.

Encircling the sanctuary is the ambulatory, which features mahogany veneer walls; the warm appearance of the wood was selected to serve as a foil to the exposed concrete surfaces. The roof over the sanctuary is sunken, with gray Plexiglas clerestory windows rising at its perimeter to light the ambulatory and cast an indirect glow on the perimeter rooms that serve as a chapel, library, offices, and meeting rooms. The clerestory windows are hung with an innovative clip system and fit into channels at their sills. Designed in consultation with Rohm & Haas Company of Bristol, Pennsylvania, who invented Plexiglas, and

[94] Kacmar, 93.
[95] "Living Unity... Hartford Church Responds to the Breezes."
[96] Lundy to Reiser, December 2, 1963.
[97] "Connecticut Prayer Tent."
[98] See Clouette. Austin Organs, Inc., established in 1893, relocated to Hartford in 1899 and is still in operation. A portion of the historic building complex is still extant and located on Woodland Street in Hartford, CT.
[99] Lauriat, 1.

Universal Unlimited of Glen Cove, New York, who specialized in outdoor signage, the clerestory window glazing was intended to slide up and down as the roof deflected.[100]

The peripheral gathering spaces are partitioned by the radial concrete walls. All rooms are lined with windows and have separate exterior entrances, which reference the openness of the faith.[101] The inclusiveness of Unitarianism is further emphasized by the building entrances existing at different levels of the structure, including at the sunken exterior courtyard spaces and main-level balconies.[102] Within a design notebook, Lundy noted, "changing levels, changing approaches, leads to a unity which is the starting point."[103]

Consequently, the Meeting House effectively suits the needs of the congregation while symbolizing the faith it serves. Through its expressive form, made possible by innovative structural solutions and modern construction materials, it also references Baroque design in its "complex curved surfaces, the combination of symmetry with unusual geometries, the lighting from indirect sources, [and] the visually ambiguous boundaries of interior space."[104]

Lundy's initial scheme, which was featured in *Architectural Record* in February 1962, displays the overall form and building layout as it was eventually constructed, with a few variations. Lundy's early concept included three small interior courtyards along the exterior edge of the ambulatory, which were later removed from the plan. One courtyard was positioned behind the chancel, separating it from the chapel, while the others were located at approximately third points of the circumference. These were intended to provide visual relief and define play areas for children in the congregation. Lundy also envisioned creating a hierarchy of spaces by varying the ceiling height of each peripheral room based on functional significance: for example, the chapel ceiling was the highest, followed by the lobby, then the library, and each children's classroom by age.[105]

Construction (1963–1968)

On February 14, 1963, Matthew J. Reiser Inc. 2/21/2024 12:30:00 PMof Hartford was contracted to build the Meeting House.[106]A circa 1962 bid worksheet in the Society Archives details bids from six firms. Reiser provided the lowest bid, of $569,000, likely the reason they won the project.[107] However, Reiser's resume also included a recent contemporary-style church: St. Mary's Parish Mission Church (later St. Robert Bellarmine Church) in Windsor Locks, experience which likely worked in their favor, although the mission church was nowhere near as complex as Lundy's design for the Meeting House.[108]

[100] See "Connecticut Prayer Tent"; Lundy to Reiser, August 13, 1964; Johnson to Steiner, July 19, 1964. Plexiglas, trademarked in 1933, became commercially available in architectural applications following WWII. Its ability to bend without breaking made it a suitable material for the clearstory glazing adjacent to the roof decking, which moves and deflects in the wind. According to original project correspondence found in the Society Archives, R.A. Johnson of Rohm & Haas consulted on the design of the clerestory windows and Universal Unlimited fabricated them. For a history of Universal Unlimited, see Ketcham.
[101] See Schwennesen.
[102] "Living Unity... Hartford Church Responds to the Breezes."
[103] Lundy, "World War II Sketches by Victor A. Lundy."
[104] See Dixon.
[105] Lundy, "New Ideas of Victor A. Lundy," 119.
[106] Matthew J. Reiser, Inc., and the First Unitarian Congregational Society of Hartford, "Contract."
[107] Lundy, "Tabulation of Bids."
[108] Matthew J. Reiser, Inc., "New Church for the First Unitarian Congregational Society of Hartford." The original budget was only $500,000; "Construction Starts Soon on Mission Church."

Challenges arose early on relating to the construction of the concrete radial walls and persistent leaks resulting from the atypical roof design. Lundy took exception to the inconsistency of Reiser's casting of the concrete radial walls, which resulted in disparities in the concrete quality and a nonuniform appearance.[109] Lundy was concerned about this effect since light from the clerestory windows would be cast on the concrete, emphasizing the irregularities. In correspondence on the subject, he reiterated, "I want perfectly straight surfaces."[110] Patches were required to address the deficiencies and all concrete was sandblasted to create a more uniform appearance. Construction was shut down for the winter before repairs and sandblasting could be completed on the walls.[111] Efforts recommenced in spring 1964. After the concrete work was approved, the roof was laid.

The history of building leaks, which began well before the first service was held on December 6, 1964, is well documented in correspondence among Lundy, Reiser, and J. Garland Pass, Jr., Chairman of the Building Executive Committee.[112] In a letter from the Building Executive Committee to Lundy, dated March 9, 1965, Pass explains:

> Our patience with Reiser has just about reached its end…The roof continues to leak. A serious one in the Sanctuary has ruined the finish on one of the pews and has loosened the veneer in several places…the hunt, find, and fix method of repair that the roofing contractor has been using has reached its useful limit. A better method needs to be found --- and soon.[113]

Despite multiple efforts to address the leaks during construction, leaks persisted for decades leading to several repair campaigns over the years.

Following the installation of the peripheral window assemblies followed, the interior finishes were installed. Due to cost overruns during the contractor bidding process, much of the interior construction work within the basement was eliminated to reduce the initial cost of the building. In a 1962 letter from Victor Lundy to Matthew Reiser, he stated, "the biggest concession toward cutting cost is the agreement to eliminate the basement as an enclosed usable space," and asked Reiser to remove every element from the basement scope of work that wasn't essential to the building structure. This included eliminating the interior partitions, both toilet rooms, the sewage ejector, and even the basement slab, leaving "just a dirt floor."[114] The waffle slab ceiling, columns, and footings of the central fellowship hall are original to the building's construction.

The final overall cost of the building, including the organ, was approximately $750,000.[115] The Meeting House was formally dedicated on December 6, 1964 (Figure 13); membership quickly increased from 375 to about 500.[116]

Work on the basement ultimately resumed in 1967 when funds became available. The basement was ultimately completed in 1968 under the direction of Roy E. Cook, A.I.A. His drawings and specifications were based on the original design by Lundy, who had intended this area to serve as informal and

[109] Lundy to Matthew J. Reiser, Inc., September 10, 1963.
[110] Lundy to Reiser and Alfano, October 4, 1963.
[111] Reiser to Lundy, December 20, 1963.
[112] See Davenport.
[113] Pass to Lundy, March 9, 1965.
[114] Lundy to Reiser, August 23, 1962.
[115] Lauriat, 1.
[116] Meyer, 68.

supportive spaces, with a large fellowship hall at the center and peripheral rooms functioning as classrooms, mechanical rooms, janitorial rooms, and a kitchen.[117]

In 1965, Lundy received the American Institute of Architects' First Honor Award, New England Region, for the Hartford Meeting House.[118] The Meeting House exemplifies Lundy's bold and highly expressive church roof forms, contrasted with his disciplined use of honest, straightforward materials, both traditional and new, to activate his concept of Gothic logic in a contemporary religious architecture. As in Lundy's earlier churches, the Meeting House's wood, steel, and concrete structural system tested technical limits to provide a dramatic and highly symbolic sheltering roof over an open, yet intimate, worship space.

[117] Cook and Puryear, "Basement Build-Out."
[118] Kacmar, 227.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

____ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
____ previously listed in the National Register
____previously determined eligible by the National Register
____designated a National Historic Landmark
____ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
____recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

____ State Historic Preservation Office
____ Other State agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
____ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 5.99

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84:_____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)
1. Latitude: -72.712814 Longitude: 41.7889025

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundaries of the nominated property are shown on Figure 2 and follow the current (2024) property boundaries of the parcel identified as number 105-001-017 by the City of Hartford Assessor's Office and in the City's geospatial data. The western edge of the L-shaped parcel affronts Bloomfield Avenue and is 286.05 feet long. The southern edge, which is adjacent to the former Hartford Orphanage Asylum (now "The Village") forms a right angle (90°) with the eastern edge and is 709.8 feet long. The eastern edge forms a right angle (90°) with the southern edge and is 400 feet long. The northernmost edge, which is adjacent to the Watkinson School, forms a right angle (90°) with the eastern edge and is 511.81 feet long. The leg of the L-shaped parcel is formed by a small rectangular parcel affronting Bloomfield Avenue measuring 113.95 feet on its eastern edge and 198 feet on its southern edge.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries for the nominated property encompass the six-acre Bloomfield Avenue parcel denoted in the 1960 deed reflecting the congregation's purchase of the building site for the construction of the meeting house. The meeting house is the only building on the subject parcel. The boundaries of the nominated property are consistent with the limits of the congregation's original land tract at this location.

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: _Written by Nathaniel Schlundt A.I.A. and Laura Buchner, Senior Conservator; edited by Michele Boyd, Preservationist
organization: _Building Conservation Associates, Inc. ___
__(Edited By Jenny Scofield, CT SHPO)_____
street & number: _44 East 32nd Street_____
city or town: New York _____ state: __NY_____ zip code:_10016____
e-mail__mboyd@bcausa.com_____
telephone:__212-777-1300_____
date:__September 2023_____

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5- or 15-minute series) indicating the property's location.

- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Graphics
[Insert Figures.
Photo key included in Figures.]

Photographs
Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: The Unitarian Society of Hartford Meeting House

City or Vicinity: Hartford

County: Hartford

State: Connecticut

Photographer: Nathaniel Schlundt, A.I.A., Building Conservation Associates, Inc.

Date Photographed: June 2023

Photograph 1 of 29. Building exterior, looking east.

Photograph 2 of 29. Memorial Garden, installed 1991.

Photograph 3 of 29. Photovoltaic panels at the southwest corner of the property.

Photograph 4 of 29. Newly installed site fence at The Village for Families & Children.

Photograph 5 of 29. Long-range view of building exterior, looking east.

Photograph 6 of 29. Detail of roof showing drain, membrane, and flashing.

Photograph 7 of 29. Detail of primary entrance at west façade.

Photograph 8 of 29. Detail of secondary entrance at southeast building corner.

Photograph 9 of 29. Exterior wall composition at main-level peripheral meeting rooms.

Photograph 10 of 29. Easternmost bays showing the exterior balcony at the main level and the sunken courtyard at the basement level.

Photograph 11 of 29. Trapezoidal glass-and-metal doors to balcony from the chapel.

Photograph 12 of 29. First-floor lobby.

Photograph 13 of 29. Sanctuary pews, with alteration to accommodate ADA access.

Photograph 14 of 29. Central sanctuary showing wood ceiling canopy with wood “rays.”

Photograph 15 of 29. Detail of clerestory windows and wood “rays” at perimeter of sanctuary ceiling.

Photograph 16 of 29. Detail of current sanctuary lighting scheme installed in 2022.

Photograph 17 of 29. Chancel.

Photograph 18 of 29. Payson Miller Chapel, looking east.

Photograph 19 of 29. Detail of the exposed underside of the roof’s wood decking as seen from the chapel.

Photograph 20 of 29. Detail of chapel pews.

Photograph 21 of 29. Main-level peripheral meeting room, typical.

Photograph 22 of 29. Aluminum-and-glass sliding partitions between main-level peripheral meeting rooms.

Photograph 23 of 29. Main-level restroom, typical.

Photograph 24 of 29. Supplemental fluorescent lighting added to main-level peripheral meeting rooms, typical.

Photograph 25 of 29. Elevator shaft added at main-level peripheral meeting room in 1993.

Photograph 26 of 29. Metal-and-wood open-riser stairs at basement level.

Photograph 27 of 29. Fellowship Hall.

Photograph 28 of 29. Detail of acoustical panels at peripheral walls of Fellowship Hall.

Photograph 29 of 29. Basement-level peripheral meeting room with direct access to sunken courtyard, typical.

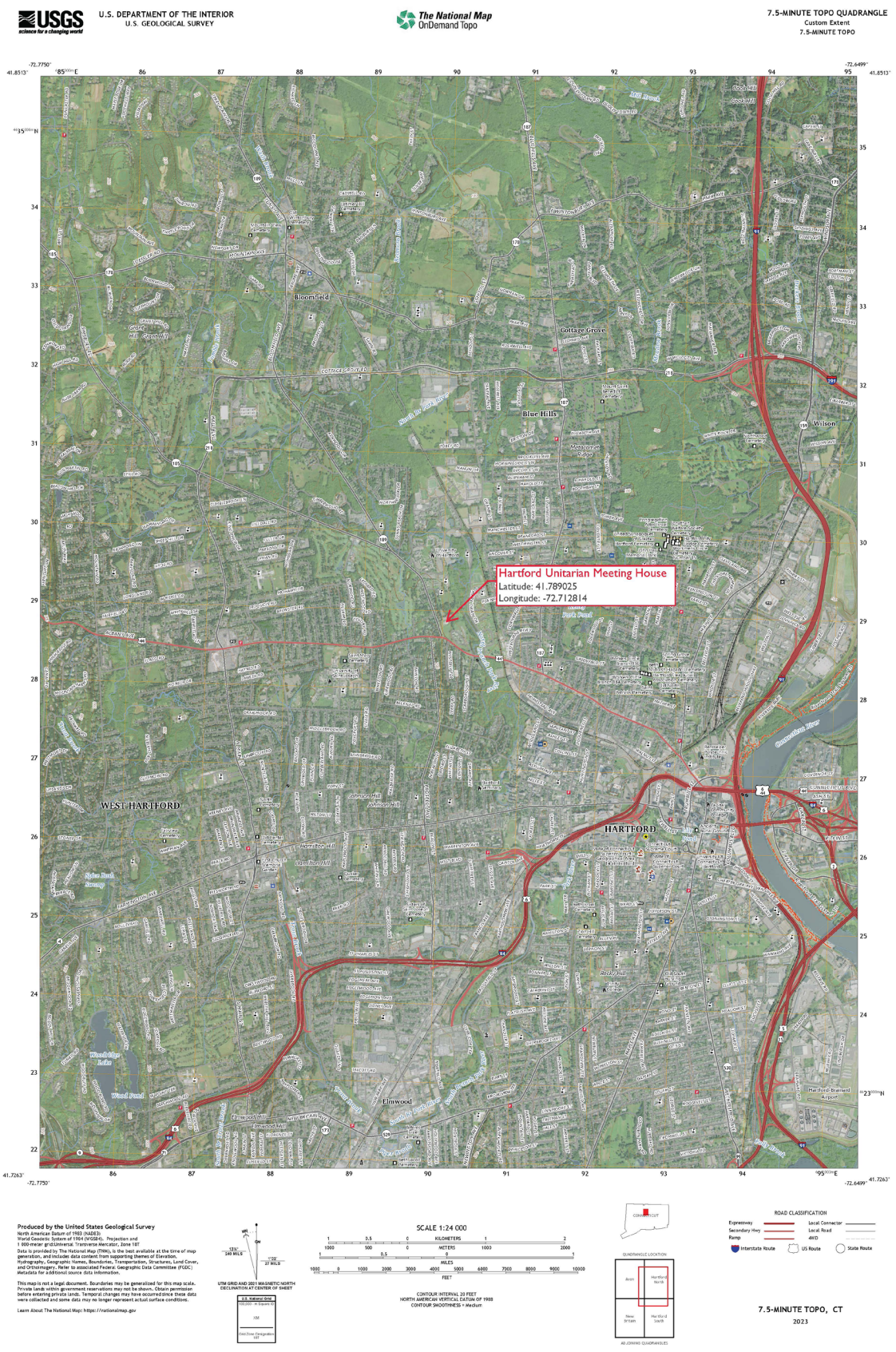


Figure 1 of 13. Location map showing latitude and longitude. U.S. Geological Survey, 2023.

Figure 2 of 13. Satellite image showing site extents; NR boundary in white. Google Earth Pro, 2023.

Figure 3 of 13. Construction progress, showing the completion of the roof cables and wood decking, June 1, 1964. Archives of the Unitarian Society of Hartford.

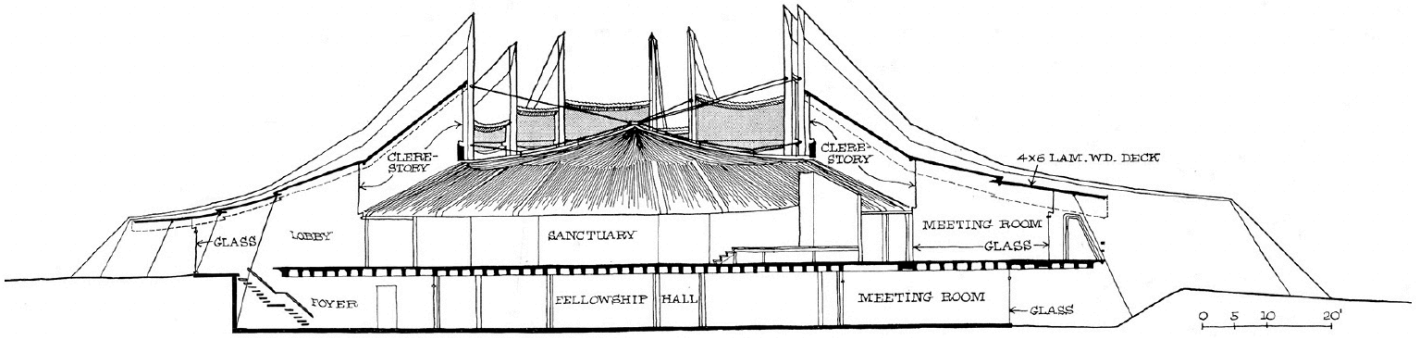


Figure 4 of 13. Schematic section, illustrating the relationship between the clerestory windows and the wood roof decking. "Connecticut Prayer Tent." *Architectural Forum*.

Figure 5 of 13. Building exterior, looking north, showing original dark-colored nylon roof membrane, c. 1964. Unitarian Society of Hartford Archives.

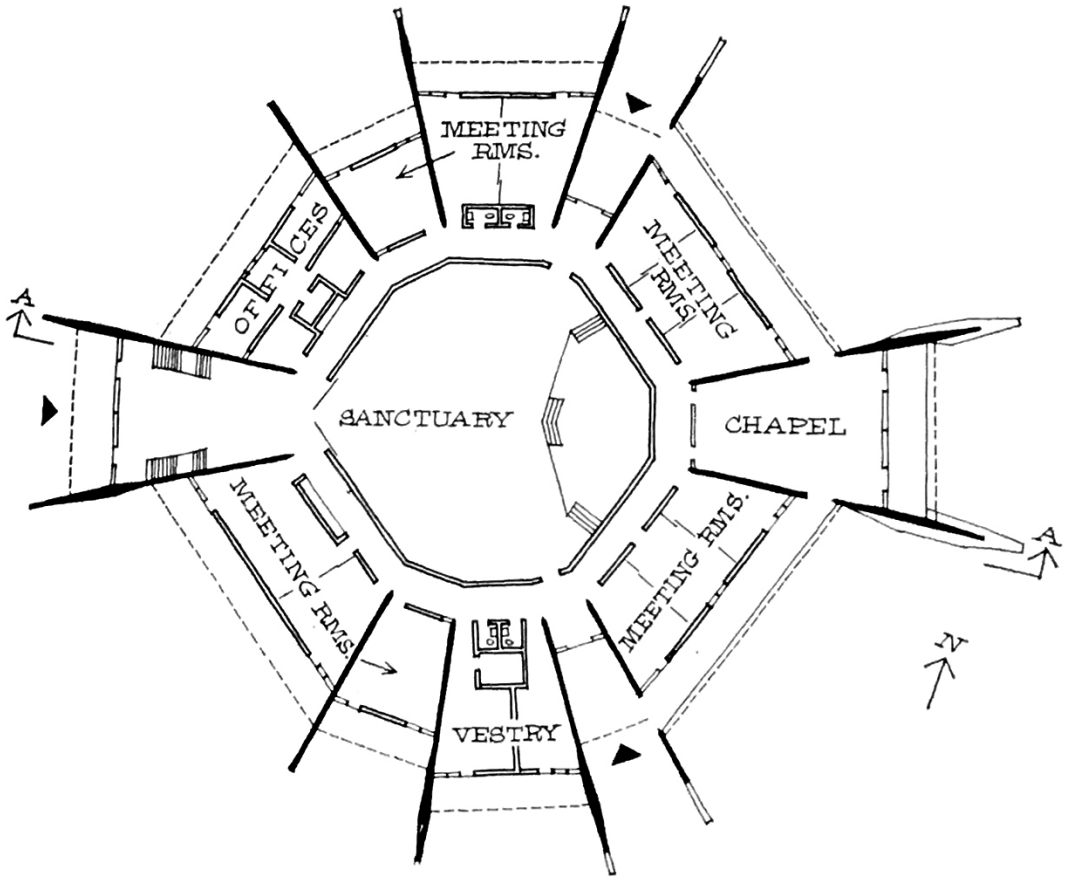


Figure 6 of 13. Main-level plan with concrete radial walls shown in bold lines. "Connecticut Prayer Tent." *Architectural Forum*.

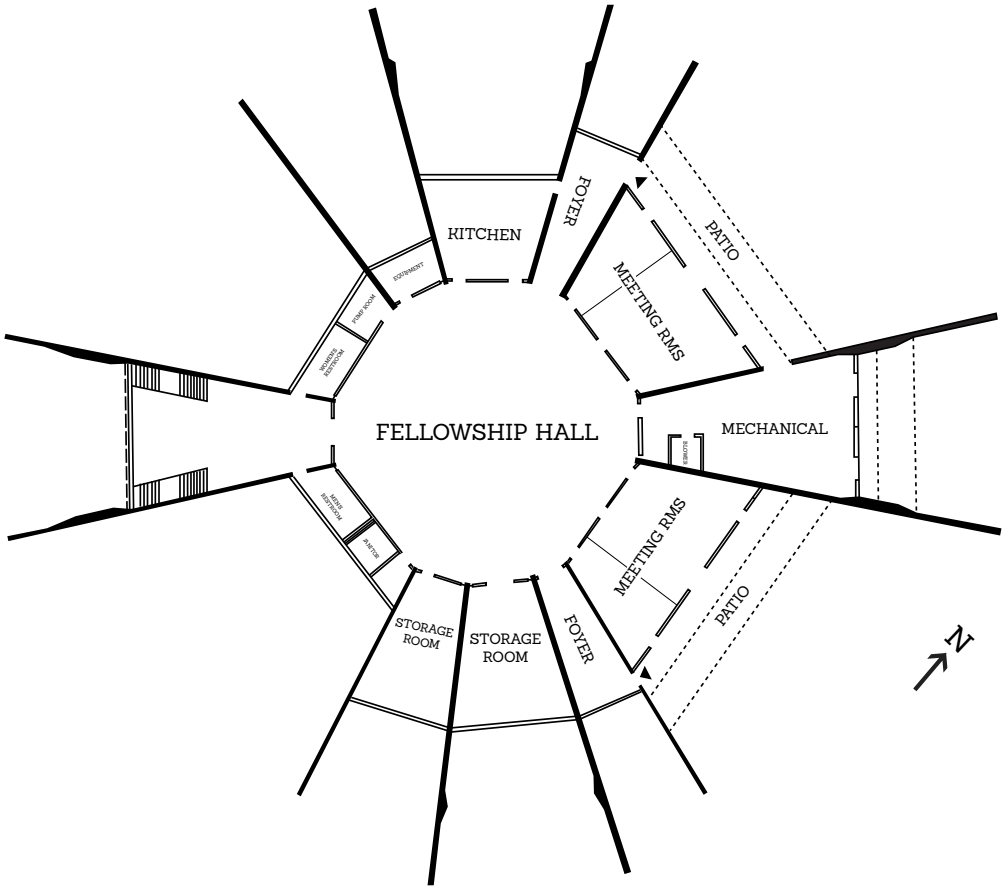


Figure 7 of 13. Basement-level plan with concrete radial walls shown in bold lines. Sketch by Building Conservation Associates, Inc.

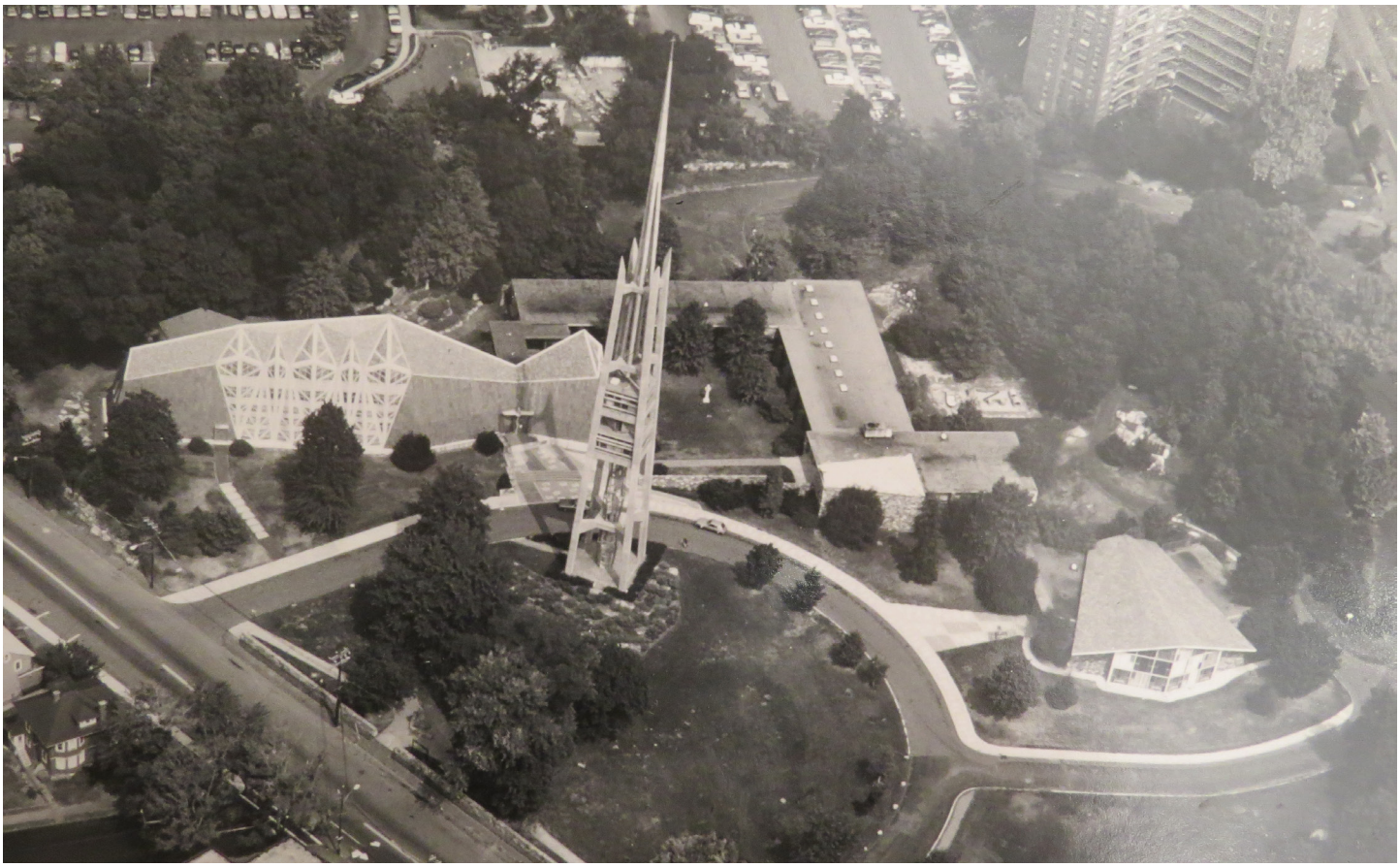


Figure 8 of 13. Campus of First Presbyterian Church, Stamford, CT, c. 1958. Avery Archives, Columbia University.

Figure 9 of 13. United Church of Rowayton, 2011. Carol M. Highsmith, The George F. Landegger Collection of Connecticut Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith's America, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs.

Figure 10 of 13. Temple Beth El in West Hartford, CT, c. 2003. Jeffrey Howe, Houses of Worship: *An Identification Guide to the History and Styles of American Religious Architecture*.

Figure 11 of 13. First Unitarian Church, Westport, CT, 1961. Donna Kacar, ed., *Victor Lundy: Artist Architect.*

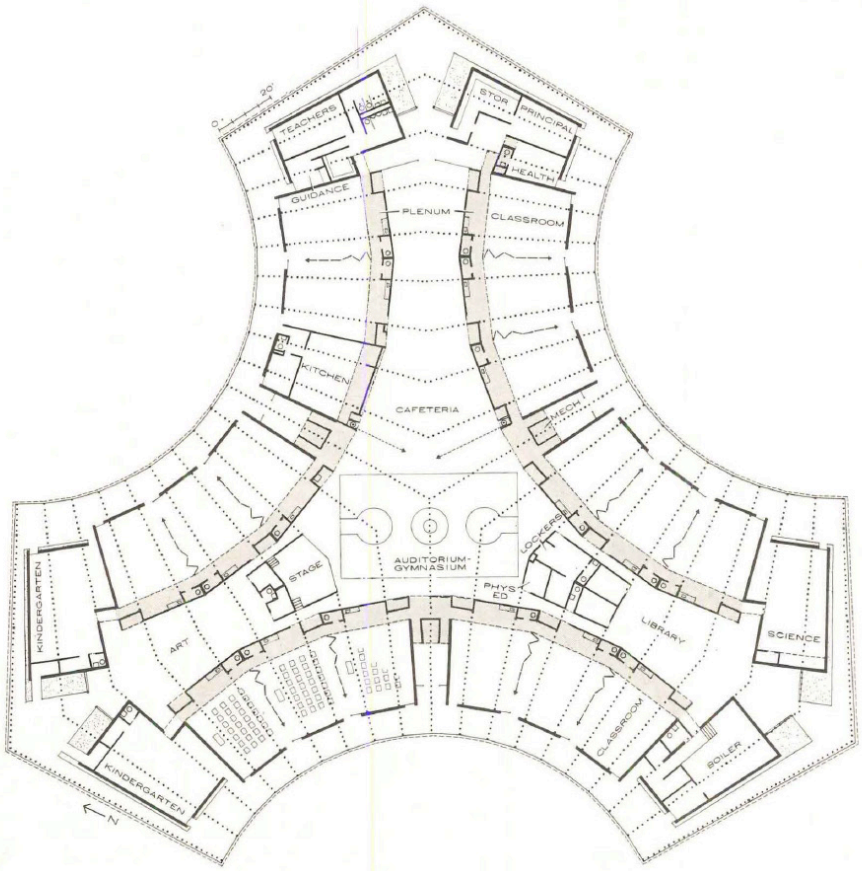


Figure 12 of 13. Plan of Hillspoint School, 1962. Victor Lundy, "Tricorn for Teaching," *Progressive Architecture*.

Figure 13 of 13. Interior view of the newly completed sanctuary, c. 1964. Library of Congress, Victor Lundy Collection.

Photograph 1 of 29. Building exterior, looking east.

Photograph 2 of 29. Memorial Garden, installed 1991.

Photograph 3 of 29. Photovoltaic panels at the southwest corner of the property.

Photograph 4 of 29. Building exterior looking northeast showing site fence.

Photograph 5 of 29. Main driveway.

Photograph 6 of 29. Roof scupper in concrete peripheral wall.

Photograph 7 of 29. Detail of primary entrance at west façade.

Photograph 8 of 29. Detail of secondary entrance at southeast building corner.

Photograph 9 of 29. Exterior wall composition at main-level peripheral meeting rooms.

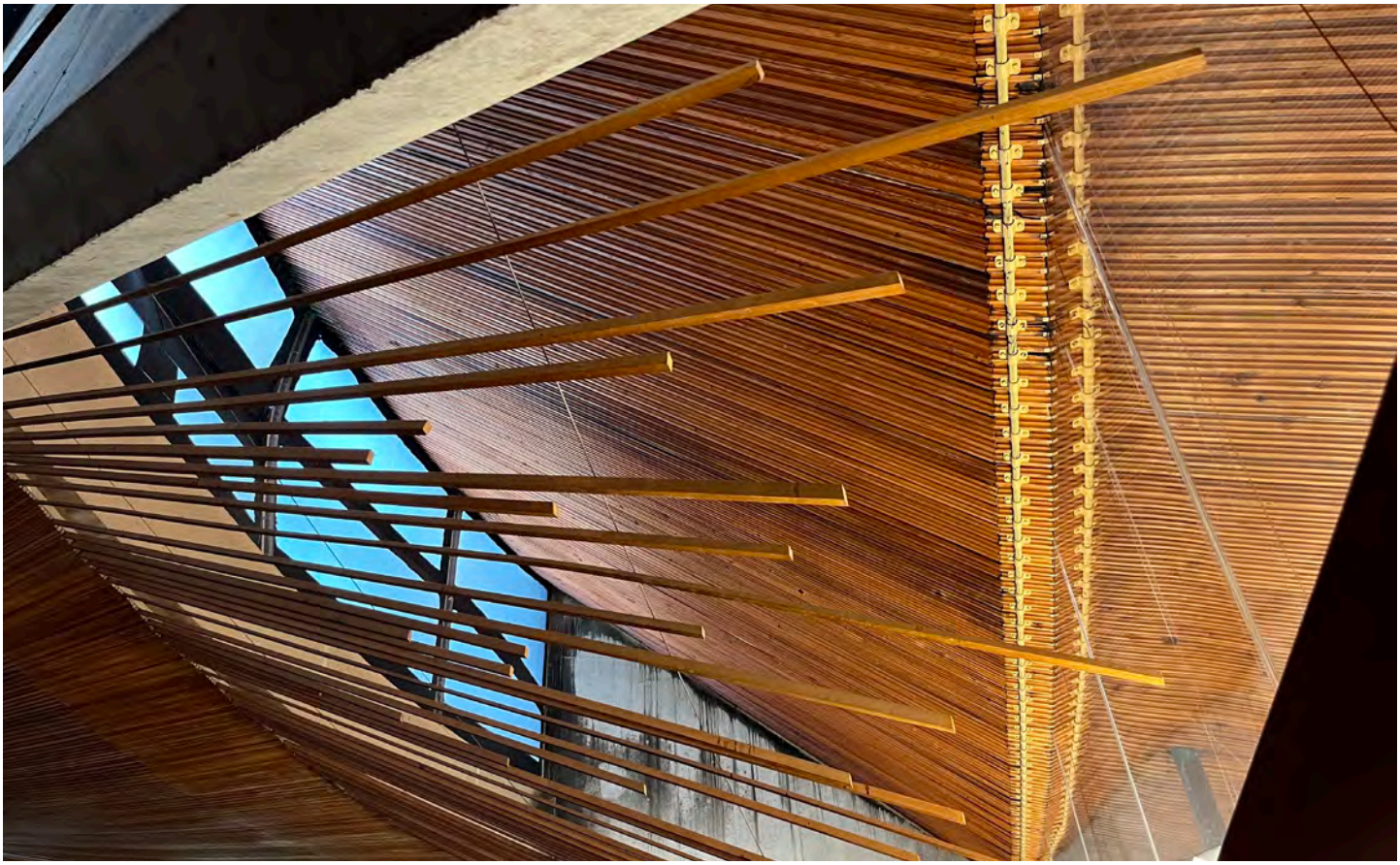
Photograph 10 of 29. Easternmost bays showing the exterior balconies at the main level and the sunken courtyards at the basement level.

Photograph 11 of 29. Trapezoidal glass-and-metal doors to balcony from the chapel.

Photograph 12 of 29. First-floor lobby.

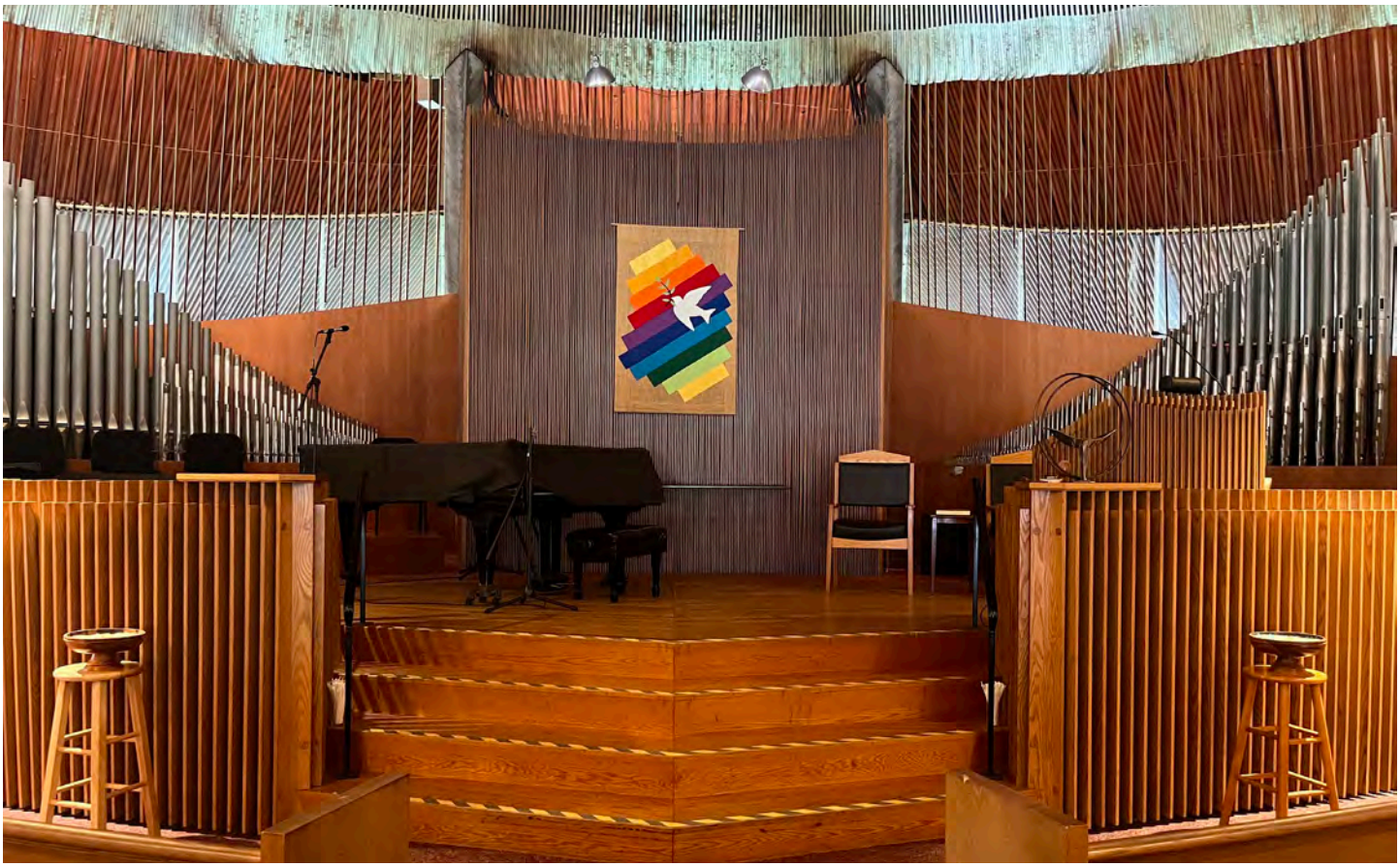
Photograph 13 of 29. Sanctuary pews, with alteration to accommodate ADA access.

Photograph 14 of 29. Canopy of wood strips and "rays" with contemporary lighting scheme at sanctuary ceiling.



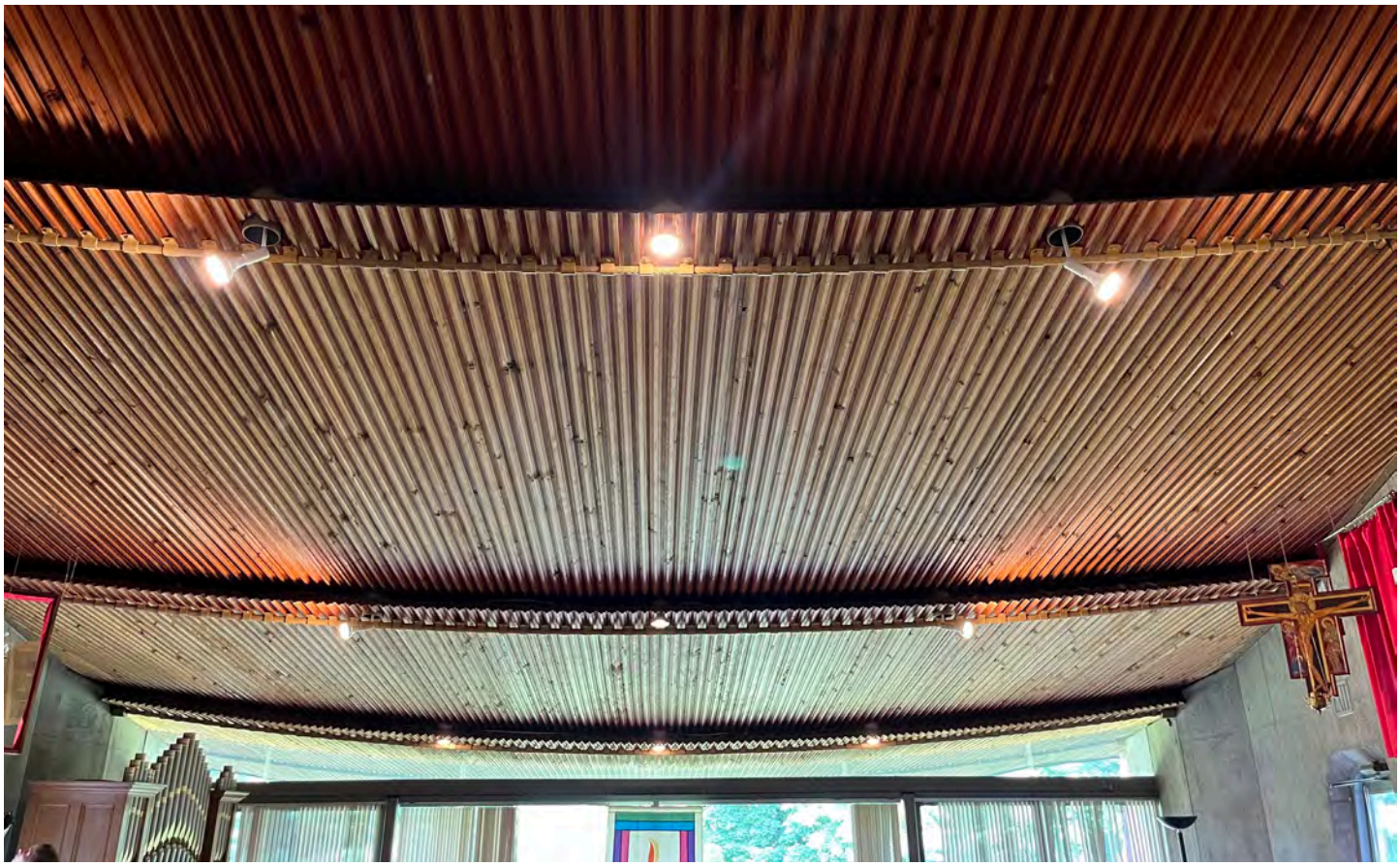
Photograph 15 of 29. Detail of wood "rays" at perimeter of sanctuary ceiling.

Photograph 16 of 29. Detail of current sanctuary lighting scheme installed in 2022.



Photograph 17 of 29. Chancel.

Photograph 18 of 29. Payson Miller Chapel, looking east.



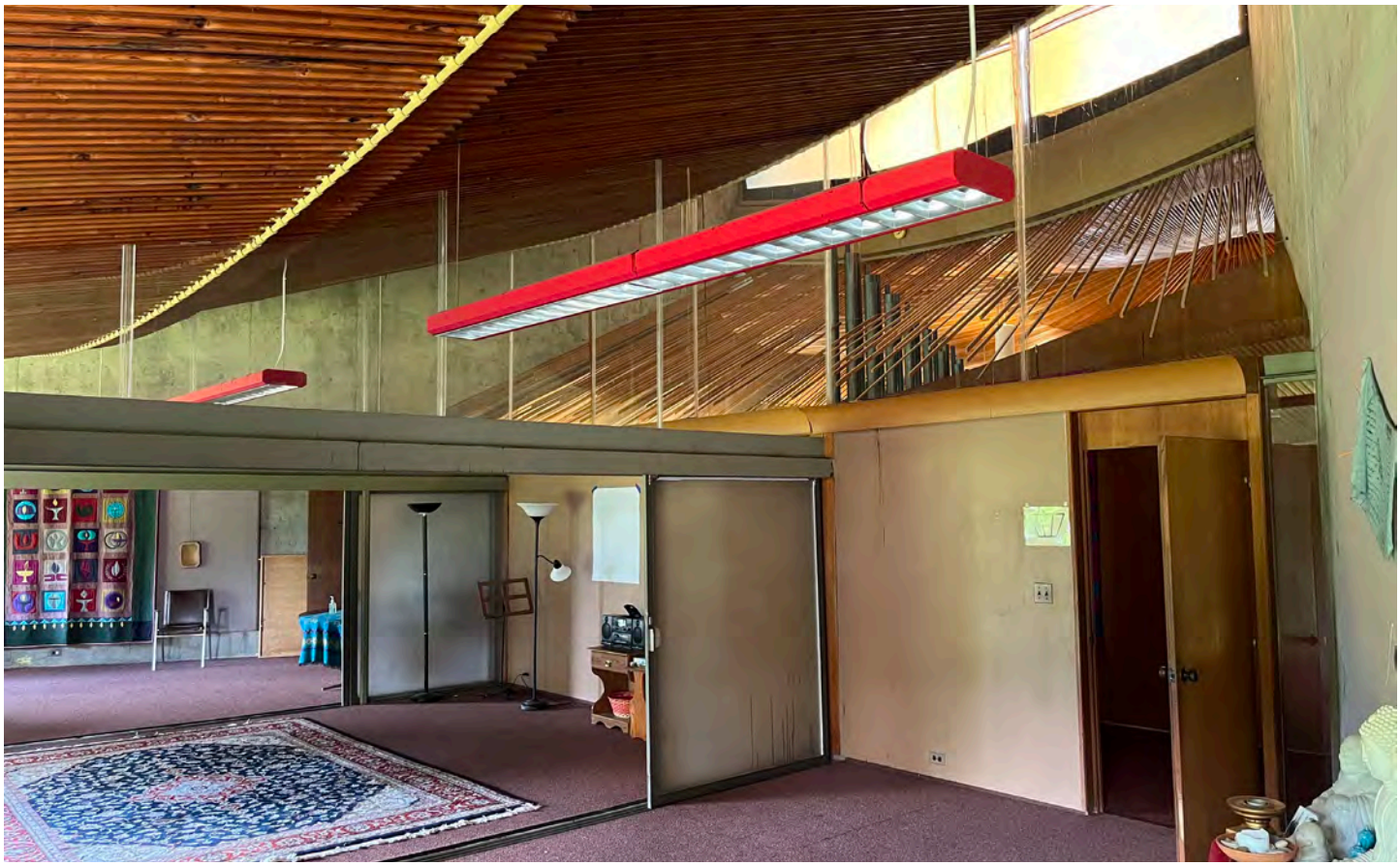
Photograph 19 of 29. Detail of the exposed underside of the roof's wood decking as seen from the chapel.

Photograph 20 of 29. Detail of chapel pews.

Photograph 21 of 29. Main-level peripheral meeting room, typical.

Photograph 22 of 29. Aluminum-and-glass sliding partitions between main-level peripheral meeting rooms.

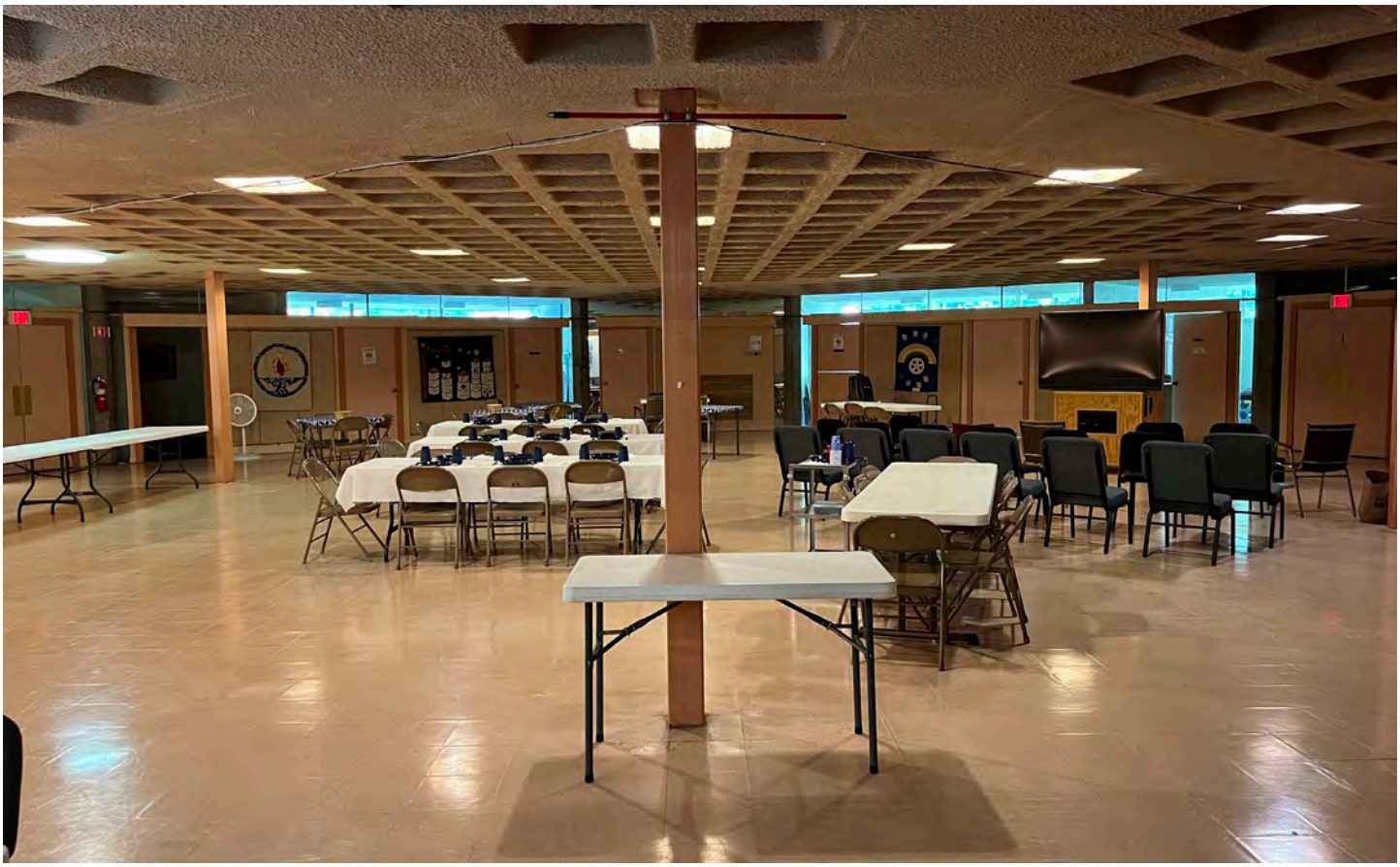
Photograph 23 of 29. Main-level restroom, typical.



Photograph 24 of 29. Supplemental fluorescent lighting added to main-level peripheral meeting rooms, typical.

Photograph 25 of 29. Elevator shaft added at main-level peripheral meeting room in 1993.

Photograph 26 of 29. Metal-and-wood open-riser stairs at basement level.



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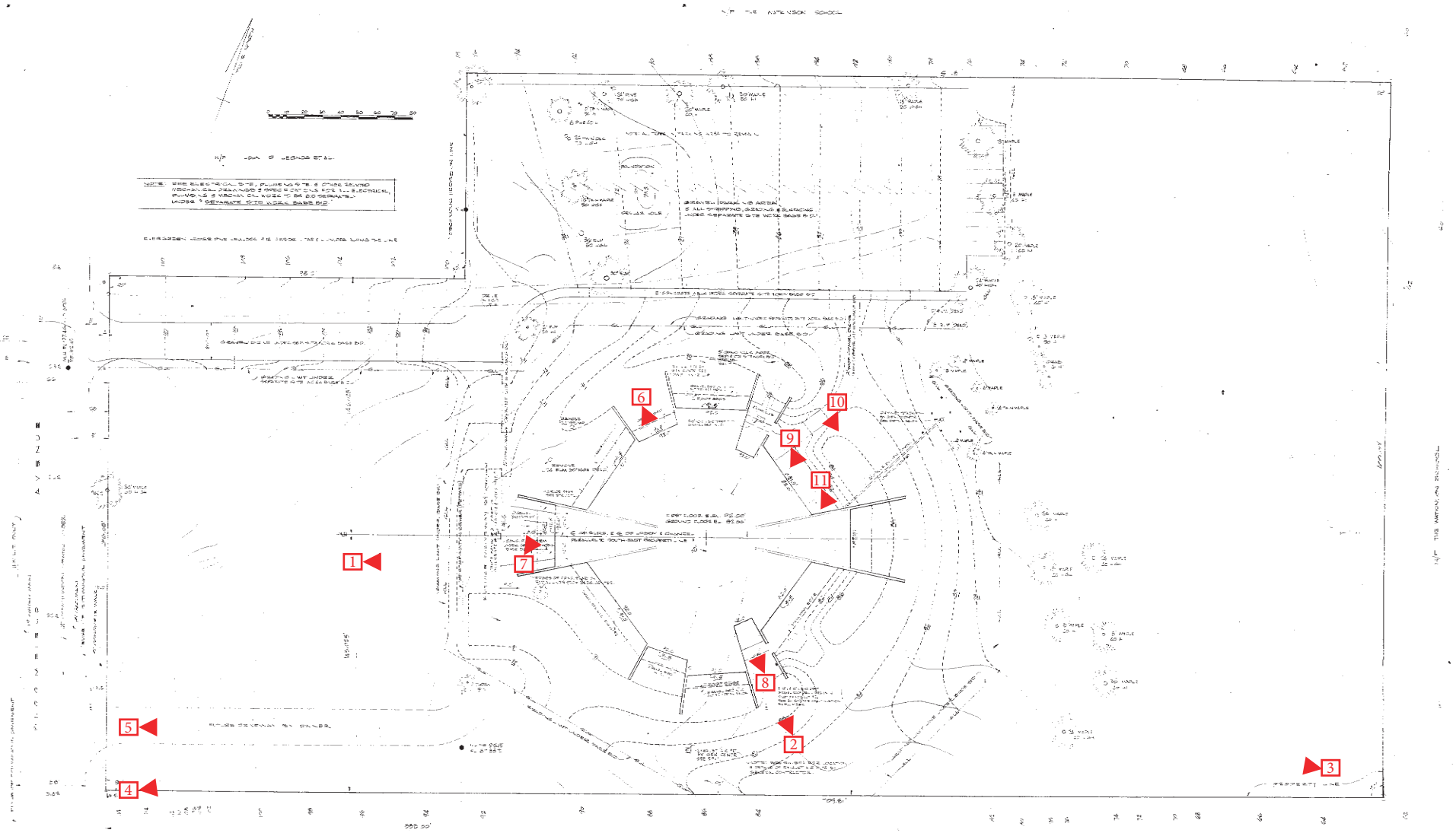
Photograph 28 of 29. Detail of acoustical panels at peripheral walls of Fellowship Hall.

Photograph 29 of 29. Basement-level peripheral meeting room with direct access to sunken courtyard, typical.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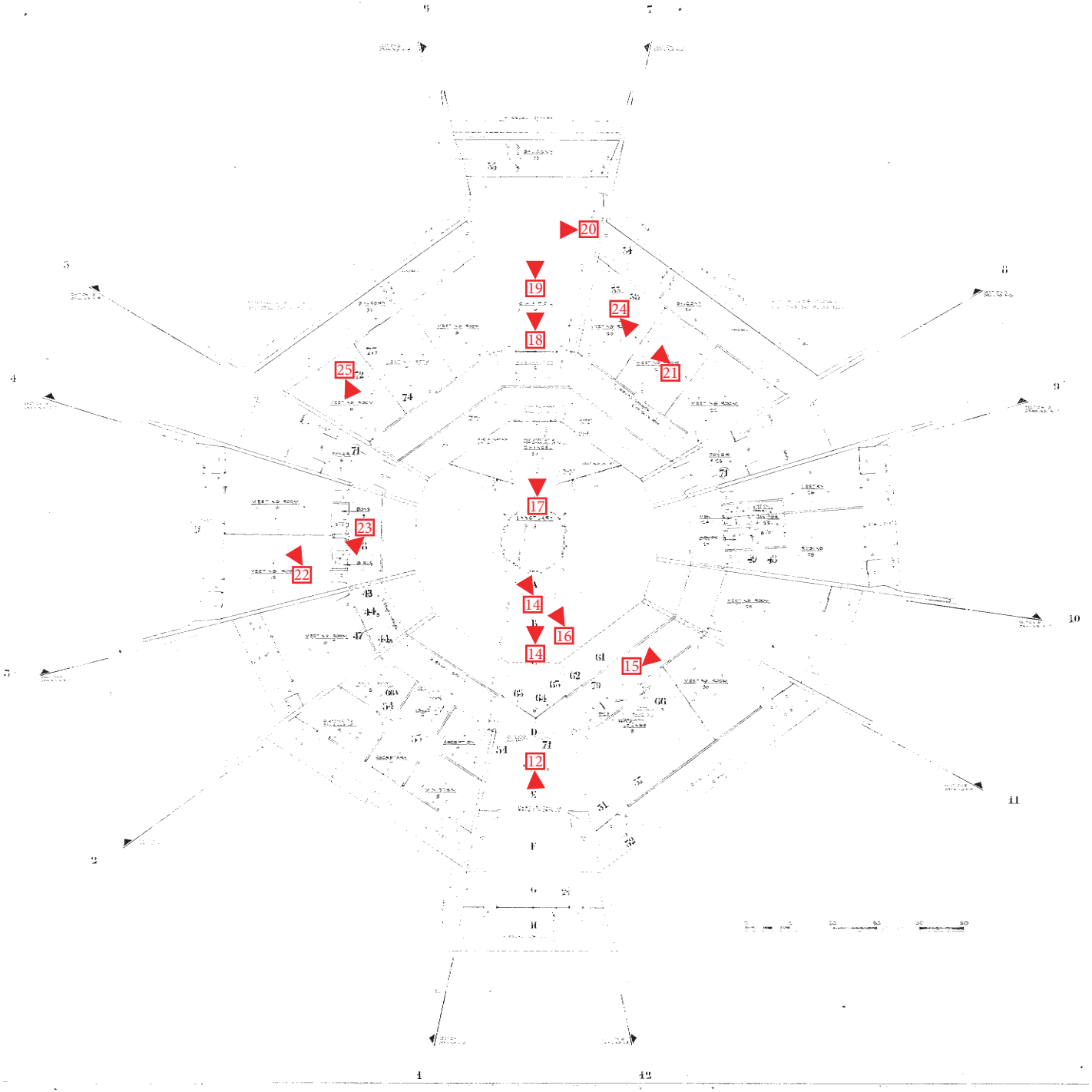
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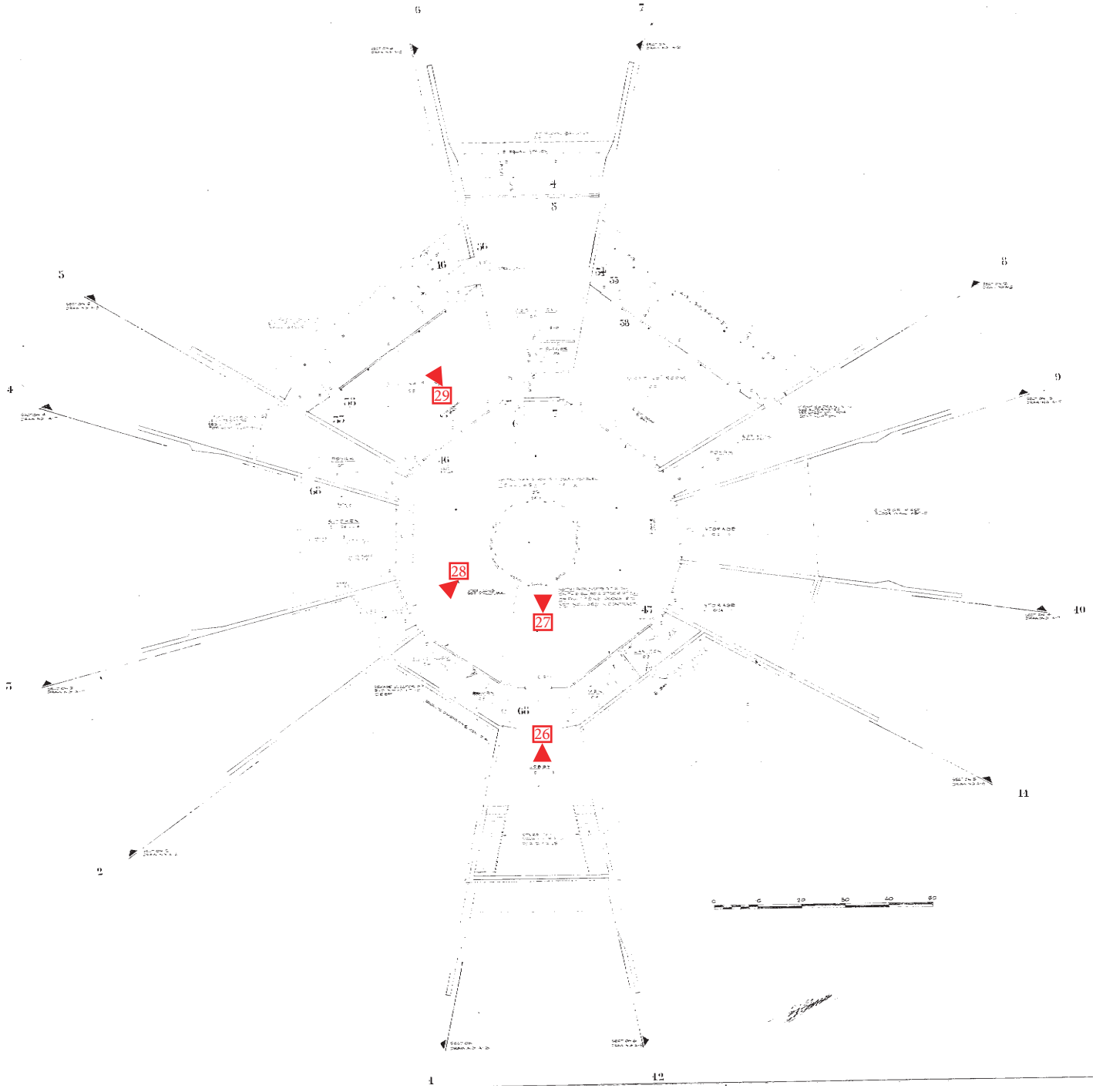
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